The Shadow

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The Shadow

by Peacock_Galaxy

Summary

Matthew was sick of living in Alfred's shadow, his own twin brother who would forget he existed in a heartbeat. Matthew's whole life had been spent tucked away behind his warmly beloved brother, soaking up all the warmth so Matthew was left with nothing but bone-deep cold. No matter how hard he tried, he was never enough and never measured up. A lifetime of neglect had taken its toll and left him empty and bitter. When a child is abandoned by a village, he will burn it down just to feel the warmth. He knew it was wrong, but it felt so so good to chase the warmth. Once he started he couldn't stop. He was spiraling into chaos and with each escalation, he couldn't help but feel comfort in the terror he brought.

Or, Matthew unintentionally intentionally becomes a prolific serial killer, unintentionally intentionally disrupting the life of his twin brother and all his friends as he starts on a path of destruction.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nobody noticed Matthew Jones-Williams. They only saw Alfred, who acted like he was God's gift to the world. When Alfred was next to him, he absorbed all the attention and drowned Matthew out with his shining light. When Matthew was a kid he didn't mind. He looked up to his brother, the picture-perfect poster boy who had it all. But as he grew older, he grew more tired.

Nobody talked to Matthew, only Alfred. Why bother with Alfred's weird parasite? It wasn't like he was his shadow on purpose. Matthew just couldn't compete and snatch the spotlight from his golden brother no matter how he tried. Even his parents couldn't share their love evenly, they only had eyes for Alfred. Nobody wanted to be his friend when the much more *interesting* Alfred was in the picture. Everyone was more than happy to let Matthew fade into the background and forget he was in the room. Forget Alfred had a brother and, was it a running joke that they forgot his name? There's no way *everyone* could forget his name. Seriously, Matthew was a *common name!* It would be impossible for so many to have such severe memory problems. Surely they thought they were being funny, but he knew they *weren't* . Every time someone stared at him blankly he knew they forgot - or just didn't listen in the first place. Time and time again proved he wasn't worth listening to! The resentment inside him bubbled and boiled, but never spilled. Only ever blistering *his* insides while his outside stayed as pleasant as ever, just as he was expected to be.

What hurt most was his own twin brother forgot *him* . He never forgot his name... Only that he *existed* . And they were *twins* ! Alfred must be *so used* to thinking he's the main character and the world revolves around *him* that sometimes he forgot he had a sibling who was pushed into the shadows.

The shadows were all Matthew ever knew and he knew he couldn't ask for more.

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It was a day like any other that changed the trajectory of his life forever.

He was so frustrated with the world. One he was born into yet didn't belong in. He wasn't to blame for his problems, he tried his best to claw his way into Alfred's world, be on the same level as him and have people love him the same. But it was *never* gonna happen. Clearly, he was marked from birth. Whatever the mark was, everyone could see it and it was a sign that tipped them off that he just wasn't worth it.

Whenever the frustration wrapped around his throat and squeezed until he was lightheaded, he'd calm himself by walking through a nearby forest. He took a switchblade and headed along a walking trail leading into a dense area of woodland. Nature always made him feel better and so did assaulting trees by carving pictures into them. Sometimes he'd draw cutesy little things, he'd gotten very good at drawing polar bears. Sometimes as a child, he'd only be recognised and identified by the polar bear plush he carried.

Other times, when he didn't have the patience for drawings, he'd write words. The typical words you'd see in graffiti on the sides of urban buildings. Words that spoke for him, about his resentment

at the hand he was dealt with. Words that could never come from *his* quiet, restrained and polite mouth.

Today, he eloquently slashed a tree to create as many slash marks as he could. He'd never do it to his bare skin but it was so satisfying seeing the lines of lighter, fresh bark almost glow when exposed between the dark and rough surface. He couldn't hate himself for what the world did to him. Why punish *himself* for how *others* treated him?

He stepped back from the tree to admire his artwork as he let out a big breath. Striking and slashing were quite physically demanding once he got into it. He was more bottled up than he thought. He didn't have anyone to share his emotions with so he bottled them up and created 'art' on trees that didn't deserve it either. At least now he was calm enough to return home...

He was following the trail home when he saw someone coming the opposite way, It was a nice day out but he hadn't seen anyone else on his mission to deface a tree, so Matthew was rudely reminded that his private destressor activity could've been interrupted at any given time. As the figure grew closer, Matthew's sour resentment slowly returned as he recognised who it was. It was his cousin Arthur, who just like *everyone else* , forgot he existed. Matthew was bitterly convinced that sometimes it was willful. As his frustration returned he curled his hands tightly in his pockets. Guess he'd find out, Arthur wasn't far away and he was looking away from Matthew. As he came closer Matthew's heart tugged when he realised he was right. Arthur was trying not to look at him. His nails cut into his palm.

Seriously? Matthew was always nice to him! Even when Alfred and Arthur were fighting and on turbulent terms, Matthew tried to stick with him. Only to be brushed off when Arthur apparently only cared for Alfred. *Always Alfred*. Leaving Matthew to wonder *what* he was missing, what *everyone else* had that *he didn't*.

Matthew was *always* polite to everyone, even if they ignored him. He knew Arthur was raised to be polite, and here he couldn't even give him a small smile or wave as they crossed paths. The rubber band that had been wound up inside him, holding him together and restraining him finally snapped. Suddenly his mind was clear and he felt like he could move with ease as his limbs were like liquid.

Why should he punish himself for how others treated him?

Suddenly he wanted Arthur to come closer. He wanted him to *pay* .

Matthew kept his face blank when Arthur was right in front of him, but his heart was contorted in anger. His older cousin kept his eyes right ahead, pretending he didn't see.

Fucking suit yourself .

Matthew ripped his fist from his pocket and flicked open the blade. He struck his arm forward and jammed it into Arthur's neck. It was then Arthur finally saw him. Eyes widened and locked onto Matthew's in what could only be fear, but Matthew saw respect. He yanked the blade out and Arthur's hands scrambled for his neck as he coughed and choked. But Matthew wasn't done. He plunged the knife forward, over and over. Slick blood was pouring down Arthur's front and pooling between them. It ran down Matthew's hand to his elbow and smeared on his shirt as he pulled his arm back to thrust again.

He wasn't really in his body. Distantly Matthew knew he was trembling and shouting. His movements were erratic as he laid into Arthur about *everything* he did wrong, every grievance he

had with him because Matthew apparently just wasn't *enough* for him. Blood ran from Arthur's mouth as he tried to speak and choked. Too bad Matthew would never know what he was trying to say, but it was too late.

Matthew jumped back when Arthur collapsed backwards and continued writhing as his uncoordinated hands uselessly trembled over his injuries. Matthew was breathing heavily. His mouth was dry and he didn't know what to say as Arthur spasmed and dark blood spurted. He held the switchblade tightly as his eyes locked onto Arthur's. His cousin was staring, his eyes were glossy and Matthew couldn't decipher what his look meant. But he didn't like it. Matthew started breathing faster. Arthur was going to die and he killed him. He swallowed and shoved the knife back into his pocket, he needed to keep his mind clear.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," Matthew said as he looked around. Nobody to witness, perfect.

Arthur had lost all his colour and he only twitched occasionally as his breathing became shallow and he fought for breath. People took so much longer to die in real life than in his brother's stupid beloved movies. It would have to be something Matthew kept in mind. But it was too late for Arthur to be saved and he was unable to communicate should anyone come across him. Matthew needed to leave now before he risked getting caught. With one last look at Arthur, whose weak eyes fought to stay open and stay on him, Matthew turned around and left him behind.

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He took his time getting home as the events replayed in his head. They came in bits and pieces as the stress kept interrupting the playback. He had to be sure he had no loose ends. His heart was thumping as he took every precaution to avoid being seen. He was covered in a thick layer of blood. Just *one* witness would be too many and he would be done for.

When Matthew finally stumbled back into his own backyard, he cautiously approached the house and put his ear to the door before opening it. Unsurprisingly yet thankfully, his social butterfly brother wasn't there and Matthew sighed shakily in relief. Now to get rid of the evidence...

His stomach churned at the thought of getting caught. He didn't want to get caught. Not now, not when he was finally alive!

Hastily, he stripped everything off his body and shoved it in the washing machine. Everything, he was wearing, shoes included. He couldn't be too careful. The air was cold on his bare skin as he poured in twice the amount of washing powder and slammed the door shut.

But he didn't stop there. He turned on the shower as hot as he could tolerate and stepped in, scrubbing until the water flowing down the drain was clear again and his skin was raw. He grabbed the soap and scrubbed the switchblade until he could see his reflection.

When he got out of the shower, he felt strangely empowered. Like he was a new person and he washed off the impressions of others. He looked in the mirror, and no longer saw Alfred's shadow. For once, he saw *Matthew* .

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Alfred might get lost in his own world and forget about Matthew, but he never forgot who always cooked. People *only* remembered him when they needed him. Why was it always Matthew who cooked and provided? Sometimes it just felt like he was put on this earth to serve his brother.

He was in the middle of serving soup when Alfred jumped up from his lazy position on the couch in front of the TV as his obnoxious phone rang at full blast. The ringtone made Matthew jerk with the pot and grimace as some soup hit the previously clean counter.

Alfred apparently didn't see the urgency in answering the demanding sound, leisurely reaching for his phone and checking the caller-

"Shit!" He darted outside before Matthew could ask. Not that Alfred was guaranteed to answer him.

Whatever. Matthew held his tongue, served the portions and put the rest away. Whatever program Alfred was watching was almost finished and the news was going to start soon. They usually watched the news as they ate dinner with minimal interest, but today Matthew was looking forward to it.

Matthew had just put the bowls down and sat on the couch when Alfred came stumbling back in, looking like shit. His hair was a mess as he kept running his fingers through it and his eyes were glassy with tears. He slumped on the couch and shoved his glasses up his forehead as he dug his palms into his eyes. Matthew frowned as he balanced his bowl on his knees.

"What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, Mattie." He rubbed his eyes clear and gave Matthew a smile that caused his concern to wane and his frustration to resurface. Alfred was always so full of himself, he always gave that smile when he decided that something wasn't worth worrying Matthew about. Because Matthew was weak and fragile, right? He was something to protect. That meant something to lie to and keep out of the loop because he wasn't important enough to be told the truth. Because above all, Alfred has deluded himself into thinking he has to be a hero.

"It's nothing, Mattie," Alfred grabbed the bowl of soup and started scoffing. "Thanks for dinner though!"

In the past, a concerned Matthew would pry, *try* to share his brother's burden only to be pushed away. Now, Matthew just let it go.

"Okay," he whispered and sipped at his own soup. He could tell that something was eating up his brother right beside him, but he wasn't a mind reader. He wasn't going to bend over backwards trying to guess either. Alfred could keep his secrets for all he cared.

When the news started with their top story, Alfred reacted like he'd been burnt and split soup down his face.

"Top story tonight, the shocking murder of a 23-year-old local man, his body found on a scenic walking trail with twenty-three stab wounds on the neck and torso a little past three in the afternoon by a jogger-"

Alfred choked down a broken sob as he carelessly dumped his bowl down and he ran out of the room. Matthew shouldn't feel surprised that what he did was on the news the same day. But he felt a little guilty because of Alfred's dramatic reaction, he was always close to Arthur so of course he'd be... wait. Arthur's name wasn't mentioned.

Matthew's sharp mind quickly put together the pieces as he sighed and reached for his brother's forgotten phone on the table. He knew his brother's passcode so he let himself in. He didn't need to

search for long when a text popped up saying 'sorry for your loss'.

He dropped Alfred's phone face down on the table. A fury burned inside him. *Of course* , Alfred was told and people sent him their condolences. But Matthew? If Matthew didn't already know about Arthur's passing, he would've never found out! Maybe the family would forget to tell him, but Alfred was going to actively keep it from him! He grit his teeth in an uncharacteristic show of something beyond placid emotion. The TV kept running in the background.

"Anyone with information is being asked to come forward."

At least that suggested they didn't have any leads and he was probably in the clear. He forced himself to take a deep breath. Matthew was detached from the possibility that he could get caught. Somehow he was completely sure that it would never happen. *As if* he'd be considered a suspect when nobody remembered he was a person.

However, something stirred inside him. Suddenly he realised why people committed heinous crimes without a smidge of remorse. They were proud. What he did was broadcast all over the city, maybe even the country! It was the first time anything he did got attention! He was ecstatic even though he knew how wrong it was, but didn't care. He accomplished something and someone took notice. He had made a difference. He was going to ride this wave as far as it took him.

The first whispers of addiction had planted their seeds, it was only a matter of time before the roots grew.

Chapter End Notes

I really hate how often Matthew is swept aside in fics and only in the background to make Alfred's life more interesting. And I hate how he's characterised as a weak nervous wreck without reason and how he's hurt/fridged to get to Alfred. Like come on why does the fandom willingly shove him into a tiny box just because there's louder characters? Why is he always in the shadows?

Also, everyone is a caricature of themselves or at least how they mostly get presented in fanon. Consider it commentary or something and make sure to have your media literacy skills on standby because this fic got out of hand and requires some mental gymnastics.

Chapter 2

Matthew watched the rest of the news on a high. The rest of the program was irrelevant as his mind entered a dreamlike state and he wondered how they'd keep reporting the case. Surely the story would be followed for *at least* a week. Maybe he should buy a newspaper tomorrow? He hadn't read one in years, but he wanted a memento. But then he thought better about it. What about Alfred? He was upset and seeing the paper wouldn't make him feel better.

Actually, maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea. Matthew was mad at Alfred for hiding the truth from him and this would make him feel guilty. Why did he have to walk on eggshells? Maybe he could drag the truth out of his shitty brother who kept secrets because he thought Matthew was below him.

Alfred eventually came back and finished his soup. He looked much more presentable but avoided eye contact when he gave his lame excuse.

"Sorry, my stomach was playing up. I had to *go* ." He chuckled and checked his phone. His face fell for a second before his facade was back and he shoved his phone in his pocket.

Matthew just nodded even though Alfred wasn't looking. He wondered if Alfred ever got tired of putting up a facade for his own twin. Matthew was always jealous of other twins who were a package deal and best friends. They could be tackling the world *together* but Alfred would prefer he didn't have Matthew. It used to make him really upset. Being ignored and left behind by peers hurt, but his own brother? Now he only felt annoyance instead of sadness. He was annoyed that he ever put up with it, that it ever happened to him. Annoyed at Alfred.

He'll be getting that paper and using it to punish his brother.

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The 'savage' attack made headline news in the paper. The lack of information so far left a lot of room for media speculation. They hadn't released the victim's name yet for some unknown reason, likely privacy. But Matthew hoped it was only a matter of time. It would extend the story's life and then he could see Arthur's face plastered on every paper article and news program before he faded into obscurity.

Alfred was still in bed when he brought the paper home and put it on the coffee table. Whether or not his brother was awake was a different story, one Matthew could investigate after he read the paper.

He was filled with the same strange prideful emotions as he saw his handiwork on the front page. There was a picture of the crime scene and a white tarp over the body and police officers were standing around within the sectioned-off area.

'Savage knife attack on tranquil track - more on page 5'

Matthew flicked to the article. It was mostly just dribble and speculation but he read it all.

' *The bloody body of a 23-year-old local man was first discovered by an unsuspecting jogger, alerting authorities immediately. Police quickly responded, closing the trail to the public and*

investigating the scene. An autopsy would provide further details, however, police believe a small knife was used to inflict multiple stab wounds to the chest and neck which resulted in death.

Police have yet to theorise a motive, stating the victim was taken by surprise because there were no signs of struggle, suggesting the attack was random and spontaneous.

An estimate suggests the body was there for an hour before discovery, shocking the community that something so heinous would happen in broad daylight.'

Matthew couldn't ask for better timing when Alfred's door creaked open and he emerged into the shared living space and made himself a coffee. Matthew gathered up the paper and followed him, placing it on the kitchen counter so they could both see it.

"This is terrible," his soft voice caught his brother's attention and Matthew could see the recognition and guilt dawn on Alfred's face as his eyes caught the key details of the headline. "So close to home and in broad daylight too."

In retrospect, broad daylight was stupid of him but thankfully no one saw. Alfred's head hit the cupboard in his haste to turn away from the confronting news and shakily grabbed his coffee. Matthew bit his lip. He'd have to push a bit harder.

"Alfred? Are you alright? You've been acting off since last night."

"It's nothing," he answered too quickly. "You don't need to worry about it."

Matthew felt hurt. Why would Alfred keep this from him?

"But I am! Why won't you tell me?" Why couldn't he prove Matthew wrong, just this once? "If it's something serious what happens when I find out later?"

Alfred looked conflicted as his eyes became glossy.

"Look, Mattie... it's- I, um-" Then Alfred was brushing past him.

"Argh. I'll tell you later."

And he was gone.

Matthew's mouth twisted as his eyes began to water. Conflicting emotions pulled him in every direction, but his shell of a body stood frozen in place.

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Alfred never told him.

A couple of days later Arthur Kirkland's name and face made the news. Matthew bought two newspapers. One to leave lying around on the kitchen bench to let Alfred know that *he knew* , and the second to hide in a drawer in his room. Matthew didn't know what compelled him to do that, he'd never been a hoarder. But ever since watching Arthur go limp, he'd been strangely fixated on *if* he'd kill someone again. He knew he should've been concerned that the idea never disgusted him, but he didn't push it into the darkest recesses of his mind like he would've done once upon a time.

He knew Alfred found the paper when his brother burst into tears and collapsed on the kitchen floor. Matthew felt guilty at his reaction and wondered how he'd been holding it all together until now. If he had been desperately trying for the sake of others or to preserve an image, Matthew wouldn't know. Alfred never talked to him.

"I'm so sorry Mattie," Alfred wailed when Matthew came in. He slid down the cupboard next to his brother as Alfred kept apologising and holding the paper so tight it threatened to rip. Arthur's face was contorted but he still had a smile that Matthew knew he would miss, even if it was never directed at him. He felt sad that Arthur was gone... but he was barely in his life to begin with . Matthew reminded himself of that to bypass any guilt. He did want to apologise to his brother out of reflex, but that wouldn't do anything. Instead, he leaned into Alfred as he desperately scrubbed his eyes.

"I'm sorry Mattie, I just didn't know how to tell you!"

Matthew wanted to say that he would've rather heard from Alfred than learn from the paper, but kept his mouth shut. Alfred kept repeating himself and in most scenarios a placid Matthew, because he can't be anything else, would say ' it's okay'. But this time, Matthew stayed quiet as Alfred drew him into a hug and did his best to reassure *him* . Even now Alfred was still trying to play hero, but Matthew ignored that as he allowed himself to go slack in his brother's loving arms.

It's all Matthew could've ever asked for. Just a little bit of evidence that Alfred cared for him. Even if it was in the wrong circumstances and wrong way.

He knew that his brother loved him... well, he didn't know that. Sure, Alfred was possessive and treated Matthew as an extension, but that didn't mean love. His entire life he doubted if Alfred loved him like a person but occasionally he'd be given undeniable proof. And now Alfred was giving it too late. Matthew was a ruined person.

He had killed Arthur.

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Since Arthur's death there had been a lot of chatter. Matthew loved hearing people talk about it. About what he did. About how horrible it was. And it was horrible , but he loved the attention. He'd gone his whole life cold and once he felt a flicker of warmth, he wanted to burn.

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He didn't know what Alfred was thinking. Was he just never going to tell Matthew that their cousin was killed? Was he going to keep him out of the loop and not let him go to Arthur's funeral?

Arthur's funeral was nice, held in a lovely Catholic church with a tall, decorated ceiling. Not a single detail was missed in the planning and more people attended than Matthew would've thought.

Matthew's funeral would never have so many people. He'd bet someone would forget to even plan it. He found himself offended at the scenarios that plagued his head despite knowing they hadn't even happened. The planning would fall to Alfred because their parents were always too busy for him, and Alfred would put it off because he never put his life on hold for anyone.

Arthur's coffin was nice, but to many people's disappointment, it was a closed coffin funeral. It seems that the funeral director couldn't think of how to make his body presentable in a way that

didn't remind anyone how he was murdered.

Matthew felt conflicted but also empty while sitting in the Church. It was a feeling he was used to - being alone despite being surrounded by people. He felt bad for all these people mourning, he felt amazing that he had caused this, and he felt nothing at all . The apathy was *loud* . In the row next to him, Arthur and Alfred's shared friends were sniffling and leaning into each other. Matthew could see his brother's cowlick sticking out from the crowd. Once upon a time, Matthew wouldn't have minded that his twin sat with his friends while Matthew was left behind and alone. But as soon as they arrived at the Church Alfred was darting off without a single word to Matthew. It didn't even surprise him. Matthew kept the sour look off his face until he was alone in his bedroom. Alone like he always was. Alone with his thoughts.

His thoughts screamed to be heard.

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His daydreaming didn't stop. Sometimes, when Alfred was out, he walked through the house flicking the switchblade as he thought. He was always a thinker. His introversion was a flaw to others, making others like Alfred more. But to Matthew, it was his greatest strength. Being introverted and almost invisible ensured he was kept alone with his thoughts. Not only was he a deep thinker but he was a great observer of people because he was never *in* the crowd.

He could kill again. It wouldn't be hard if he did it right and it'd be *fun* . It'd be a great way to deal with stress from a life he can't escape. If he can't *be* another person, one who's loved and given a great hand in life, then he'll just *take* . He was always a giver, giving up so much of himself and never getting anything in return. Giving until he was empty and only a shell. It was about time he *took* .

All that was left was to think about who he should kill. How about anyone and everyone who just instantly judged him and collectively thought that he wasn't worth it and never gave him a chance? Maybe he should just keep his switchblade on him if inspiration ever strikes. But who would inspire him? It would have to be someone he believed deserved it. If he was going to kill people who hurt him the most, that would be people from his past and in Alfred's life. But if he targeted people, eventually someone would figure out a pattern and make connections. So he shouldn't go hunt down a specific person, no matter how much he desired. He'd have to settle for daydreaming if he wanted someone specific.

But maybe if he came across someone he knew by chance, it would appear to be random enough. He really doubted that if he only killed people he had a grudge against, would anyone actually make a connection to *him* , Matthew Williams. Yeah, right. *As if* anyone would look past Alfred and see his shadow. If Matthew didn't exist, then they would be searching for a ghost.

There were a few people who certainly deserved to be haunted...

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something in him changed when he started carrying the switchblade around. He had confidence that swelled inside and inflated him. He was a person just like everyone else and he deserved respect. Suddenly he didn't tolerate people speaking down to him and it made him *angry* . Before he wouldn't have the guts to say anything and only internalise his frustration. But since, he no longer trembled at the thought of confrontation. Now he found himself longing for an opportunity to cause conflict and prove to himself that he could stand up and not roll over. Ever since killing Arthur he just didn't see people as the threat they once were. After all, he could always just kill them.

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Alfred sent him on a Mickey D's run. Matthew wanted to refuse with his newfound strength for boundaries when he realised that any opportunity to go out was an opportunity to engage in his... hobby. He dressed in the most inconspicuous plain clothes he could find before driving to his brother's favourite 'restaurant' and parked on the corner.

His eyes roamed the parking lot as he walked in. There were a few cars parked and the drive-through was backed up, likely the reason Alfred sent Matthew to do it. God forbid Alfred spend time away from whatever screen has captivated his attention.

Once he stepped inside Matthew knew he'd be waiting some time for his order. There were a few lost souls, looking bored out of their minds as they impatiently stood by the counter waiting for their food. Matthew resigned himself to the wait and felt himself sympathise with the poor understaffed no doubt *children* operating the restaurant. He ordered and assessed the room while he waited, entertaining his mind. No one paid him any attention. He flicked the switchblade in his pocket obsessively. He couldn't pick anyone from here, there were cameras everywhere putting him on the scene and making him a suspect if this was the last place someone was seen.

He felt bad picking someone for nothing, but he wanted to put something on the news again. He couldn't just be a one-hit wonder. As his order was called, he reminded himself that inspiration would strike. *Surely* if he was patient, the right person would come at the right time.

Matthew juggled the warm bags in his arms as he walked back to the car and struggled to open the car door without spilling their dinner. He sighed as he dumped the food onto the passenger seat and straightened up with a groan. That was when he saw *him* . Matthew shut the door quietly and paused as he looked around, assessing the situation logically. It was a residential block so no one was walking the streets , but there was the possibility of doorbell cameras and- shit, when was Matthew so paranoid?

He had a grudge against Francis Bonnefoy. He last saw him at Arthur's funeral and did his best to avoid him, and now he was planning how to make this work. Ironic. It was only a little before 8 and the man was stumbling a bit and moving in a way that suggested he had been drinking. Matthew grimaced. How Alfred and Arthur could hang out with someone so depraved, he'll never know. But after tonight, he wouldn't have to think about him again. Matthew would enjoy this.

He jumped into the driver's seat and drove to where Francis was, stopping in the middle of the road and lowering his window a bit .

"Hey! Francis!"

The man's hair whipped around as he turned to try and figure out who was talking to him.

"Oh! Mathieu!" The man called and almost tripped in his haste to get closer to the car. Shit, Matthew couldn't have that.

"Wait right there or I'll drive off!" Matthew internally cursed. He couldn't let Francis touch the car in any way without Matthew having to wash it later or he could get caught. When Alfred was obsessed with True Crime, he'd demand that was the only thing they watched at dinnertime for months. Matthew didn't have a problem with it at the time , and his current self thanked him for learning so much from it. Learning from other's mistakes would certainly help him not get caught.

"Oh, are you playing hard to get?" Francis teased and Matthew could hear a drunken slur. Francis wobbled and tried to pull a seductive face, but thankfully stayed in place. "Come on... You know you want me~"

Ever since Matthew knew him, Francis was a huge pervert. He openly commented on other's bodies and made sure they knew how he felt about their appearance, even if they were uncomfortable. He treated people like they were a *challenge* and woe-d when he found them 'easy', smug when he finally caught the 'hard' ones. Then he turned his predatory gaze on Matthew, too polite and reserved to ever say anything or do anything to stop him. Francis took great delight in making a socially anxious boy uncomfortable, thinking his panicked trembling *discomfort* was him being charmed. Matthew hated it but never felt justified in causing a scene. After all, Francis never took it too far so Matthew just had to suck it up.

Something that he just couldn't shake was the power imbalance. He and Francis wouldn't work for a myriad of reasons: he got his name wrong, he only saw a body, and Francis was higher on the social ladder than he was. Matthew was powerless. He wasn't happy about his place, but he could see it. It was predatory that Francis went for him out of all people. Why couldn't he go for someone on his own rung of the ladder?

He probably thought Matthew wouldn't kick up a fuss if he crossed boundaries. Perverted predator...

"No Francis, you can have me." Matthew gave him a small smile. "How would you like to catch up tonight?"

It was a simple phrase but like everything Francis said, it had a disgusting double meaning.

" *Oh hon hon hon* ," Laughed Francis as he leered. "I would *love* that."

Great, step one completed. Now Matthew had to fish for information.

"So you're not busy tonight? I wouldn't want to take you away from any friends or if you had a date."

"Oh, no, you would have me all to yourself tonight. I knew one way or another I'd end up with a cutie at the end of the night~"

"Perfect," Matthew smiled.

"So~" Francis was definitely beyond tipsy if his swaying was anything to go by. But his flirty borderline pervert personality stayed the same. "Where are we going, amour?"

"How about you go to the park?" The same park where he sliced trees and stabbed Arthur. "I'll meet you where the walking trails start! I have to drop something first but I'll get there quickly!"

"Good idea, Mathieu, nobody will be around to hear us!"

Matthew's eyebrows furrowed in amusement and concern. Was Francis not aware that's where his friend died? Very recently?

"I hope so," Matthew chuckled, amused at the double meaning. Francis giggled and started skipping away.

"Wait!" Matthew called. He needed to take away one last loose end. "I can't get out of the car now, but if you leave your phone on the side of the road I'll put my number in for you!"

He didn't need to tell him twice when the man quickly saw the appeal. Thankfully Francis was too drunk to question the logic as he did what he was told. Now Matthew was reassured that he wouldn't drunkenly text anyone to brag that he was meeting someone and spill who and where. That would ruin *everything* . It was a risk that could end very badly for Matthew.

"Anything for you Mathieu! Please send me a *lovely* text once you get my number!"

Matthew waited for his target to skip out of sight before driving off, leaving the phone on the side of the road. It was guaranteed it'd be found before the body but it wouldn't incriminate Matthew unless he touched it. Getting out of the car to move it was a bad idea.

He tried not to fidget as he drove home, anxious to see if Francis made it to the right place and this wasn't all for nothing. Once he parked the car he dropped the food in the kitchen knowing damn well that Alfred wouldn't care if Matthew was there to eat or not. Then he went into his room and locked the door. Alfred would think that he was home and if he actually checked in on him, assume he was sleeping. Matthew left his phone on the bed before he opened his window and jumped out.

He sprinted the entire way to the park, hardly challenged by the clustered woods even in the dark. He breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw Francis dancing on the trail markers. Since the man was drunk, Matthew was more than happy to lead the conversation and nudge things in the desired direction.

"Hey Francis," he waved as he got closer but stayed at a safe distance, "can you follow me?"

"To the ends of the earth," he leaned in a way that indicated he was trying to seem charming but just came off as a parody. Matthew wondered if any of the exaggerated pick-up-esque attitudes ever worked for him. Even when sober, Matthew could only imagine laughter at the assumed ironic behaviour.

If only Francis was just a charming, happy man who loved people and respected them above anything. Then maybe he wouldn't be on Matthew's radar. He thought about it as he led the man into the densest part of the park he could find while keeping out of arms reach. Francis kept trying to grab him and Matthew had to keep reminding him to 'be patient, we have all night.'

That he did. He intended to enjoy it this time without rushing to leave.

"Mathieu! Are we there yet? I cannot wait any longer!"

His needy whining was getting annoying, but luckily Matthew had found the final spot. He stopped and turned to his target, sidestepping when Francis finally tried to throw himself on him. He couldn't touch Francis without risking getting DNA on him. There were on a trail, one much less frequently used so his body wouldn't be found immediately, but used enough that there was enough variety in DNA just in case Matthew lost a hair or something.

Plausible deniability.

"This is such a beautiful spot, Mathieu," the other man sang as he ripped off his shirt and wiggled his eyebrows. "Do you like what you see?"

Matthew clutched the switchblade in his pocket as he stared at Francis' neck. He almost felt reluctant because Francis was just such a willing victim, so he needed to rip the bandaid off fast. He needed to start because once he did, it would be too late and he *couldn't stop. So, with his friendly smile falling from his face, Matthew pulled the knife from his pocket and slashed it as hard as he could. Blood surged everywhere as Matthew jumped backwards to avoid Francis' flailing. He could tell the man was trying to scream but all that was coming was gargles as he choked on the thick liquid. Francis' eyes were frantic as he stumbled and fell to his knees.

"My name's Matthew." Matthew *finally* corrected as he looked down on his victim. This was how he was going to leave his mark on the world! Francis writhed and raked his nails in the dirt as his movements grew weaker yet more desperate. Matthew stood back and watched as his movements grew more frantic as he seemed to sober up. Francis kept looking at him with wide eyes and Matthew fidgeted with the knife. He wanted to stab again but he was wary of his target's swiping arms as he dug and reached towards Matthew. Francis was mouthing something Matthew couldn't make out. Something was stretching inside of him and it had been pulled taunt for years. Tonight, it snapped. Frustration seized the opportunity to lash out.

The world rang in his ears as his voice grew louder, demanding to be heard for *once in his life*. Fingers ached from their hold on the knife as he plunged it in. Matthew didn't hold back as he told Francis exactly how he felt, how violent his mistreatment was. Each sentence was punctuated. With each statement, he jammed the knife into Francis' chest and watched as Francis jerked through the pain with energy he didn't appear to have. When Matthew told Francis he hated him, he could see the hurt in his eyes that slowly grew cold and unfocused as his limbs went limp and stopped jerking with each movement. Matthew didn't think about it as he plunged the knife again, and again, until Francis stopped moving completely. Matthew didn't leave until he stopped breathing altogether. Truly a remarkable, unforgettable experience.

He walked home, taking his time as he enjoyed the night and the peace that came over him. The world was silent and so was he. Except his silence didn't come from being talked over or overlooked. It didn't come from resignation from neglect. It came from *satisfaction* . He cracked his stiff aching fingers in the cool night air and let the feeling wash over him.

He got home and climbed back through his window into his room. A quick check proved Alfred was in his room so Matthew quickly threw all his clothes into the wash with twice the powder and locked himself in the bathroom. He let the water wash over him as his hands shook from the returning warmth. He did it. Again.

His success overwhelmed him.

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This time the victim's name was left out of the news as he had yet to be identified. Matthew figured Francis' ID must've been either left at home or was in his phone. It was a shame, but it did guarantee that it would be on the news again later once Francis was named. Until then, John Doe will do.

"Why would they think they're connected?" Alfred asked with a pained look as the newsreader stared back with a serious face.

"Both were found in around the same area." Matthew pointed out while considering that the area would be observed in the future and no longer an ideal location. "Maybe they have a clue about who did it or it was somehow similar?"

"I hope they have a clue," Alfred muttered darkly. "Whoever killed Artie better not get away with it."

Alfred had always been passionate about justice. A symptom of his obsession with superheroes that should've been left in childhood. Ever since the funeral, he'd read through any article he could find, hoping that somehow someone had made progress and Arthur's killer would be discovered. Matthew understood where his brother was coming from, but selfishly hoped the trail would go cold. Unreasonable anger rose at the idea that the minute he *finally* snapped back at the cruel world, that was when he'd be unfairly stopped.

They sat still on the couch, watching as the news interviewed a police officer who reassured the public they were taking this seriously and hoped that murders in this location wouldn't become a trend. Even went as far as suggesting this was a copycat act of Arthur's murder. Matthew didn't like that at all. He wanted the credit. One person was doing this and one day that would be apparent.

Alfred was sitting there uncharacteristically still with a hand plastered against his mouth.

"Are you okay?" Matthew asked and changed the channel.

"Yeah..." Alfred lowered his hand but wouldn't stop staring at the TV with glassy eyes. Matthew waited to see if his brother would say anything else, but apparently, he wasn't up for conversation. Instead, he escaped because crying in front of his twin brother... was too intimidating. Matthew wrapped his arms around himself when he was left alone on the couch.

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A couple of days later Francis' death is still the focus of the area news, only now he has an identity. As Matthew bought another newspaper, he wondered why it took so long for police to identify one man. If a man of Francis' description was reported missing and a corpse of his description turned up, all they had to do was compare. Maybe it just took that long for someone to realise Francis was missing. Matthew knew that was objectively sad, but his personal grudge was pleased.

With his identity being revealed, so did his personal connection to Arthur. The media reported on the 'hot debate' if the two were linked while heavily insinuating they were. Nothing was a coincidence if it would make a story. While Matthew knew it would be bad if everyone thought of a connection being a fact, he wanted to see what would happen.

Alfred was eating his dinner next to him and Matthew discreetly leaned over his shoulder to see what he was looking at on his phone. To his surprise and pride, the internet had blown up over the murders and was already theorising that this was the work of a serial killer. By the tone of some commenters, it seemed they really hoped so. Whether that was because they were bored or wanted to be right, he didn't know. But he couldn't stop himself from wondering what the internet would think of him once it was proven that there was a serial killer.

Serial killers were somewhat celebrities, weren't they? It was almost impossible to imagine that a nobody like him would ever be compared to a celebrity. Someone who, in daily life went unnoticed and uncared for suddenly... the idea had a hold on him already.

On the TV, a policeman was being interviewed. He stated that both murders were spontaneous, were in the general vicinity of each other and a blade had been used. He went on to say that someone was only considered a serial killer after killing three or more, with the murders taking place over more than a month and time in between. Then he was assuring the public they were doing the best they could, and Matthew sincerely hoped he was just saying those words to ease fear. After all, what could the police really do? They couldn't prevent him. All they could do was clean up his mess after the deed was done.

Matthew realised he left out the fact that both of them had slit necks , but he supposed the police were trying to downplay the possibility that there was a bigger link between the two and that a serial killer was a potential threat. He balled his fists in a sudden bout of anger. Why wouldn't they give him credit? If he needed to kill another for them to notice, for them to take him seriously, then so be it.

"What do you think Mattie?" Alfred must be having a moment of insecurity to be asking Matthew's opinion. "Do you think the same person did this?" 'The same person who killed Artie' went unsaid.

Matthew choked back a smile because he was sure it would be wicked and telling.

"I think this is just the beginning."

Chapter End Notes

Nothing against Francis/France either but I'm not the biggest fan of him in the early source material or most fanfics where he's a pervert (and is a one hit note with his personality) and it's just played off. Also, I find a lot of fics where he is shipped with Matthew/Canada to have a predatory power dynamic due to Matthew being portrayed as being powerless. Like I said, everyone's a caricature of themselves.

I'll try and update fortnightly. I've been working 6 days a week so I'm kinda dead inside. Anyways please comment your thoughts! Who do you think is next?

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A month went by without a kill, and not of his own volition. He just didn't have an opportunity. But he supposed it was for the best. That way he could lie low and when he struck next, he'd have his third victim in over a month and collect his deserved title as a Serial Killer. But a moment didn't go by without thinking, dreaming, and planning. Each waking moment was filled with the jittery feeling of 'what are you waiting for?'.

He did indulge in following the talk about the murders online. It almost felt unreal that he was the cause for such a big fuss. What began as simple interest turned into routine checking multiple times a day and scrolling for hours at a time trying to soak up everything he could find. Each speculation had him enthralled. Some believed there was something supernatural in the woods, some others believed it was somehow tied to gang activity. Matthew couldn't understand that one, but there were worse theories. None of them were correct, but the further away from the mark - the more amusing it was. Matthew could get lost scrolling for hours as he consumed all content available on the internet sensation dubbed the 'Trail Killer'.

It was surreal to have a name. To have an identity. Despite the police trying their best to reassure the public and mislead them by saying there was no serial killer, the public had already considered a serial killer as fact. The Trail Killer had taken the city by storm and Matthew just couldn't believe that it was him.

Meanwhile, Alfred was almost back to his old self. Matthew knew he was still upset about Arthur, but he didn't show it half as much anymore. He was upset about Francis too, but at least he got to attend the funeral. For what it's worth, Matthew hoped it helped. His brother was always the emotional and reactive one of the two.

Matthew wasn't invited, but he could see it was for the best. It would be insincere for him to attend any more funerals, particularly if he was the reason for them.

He had a feeling he'd be the reason for many more to come.

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As the weeks passed, his switchblade never left his pocket. Matthew's hand would always run over the sleek design as his mind wandered to a dark place with dark urges. He made no attempt to redirect the thoughts.

His daydreams were wild and violent. He imagined he could roam freely, make the most of his invisibility and hunt down those who had wronged him. Currently, he was fantasising about high school teachers who always mistook him for Alfred but never mistook Alfred for him. But those would just stay a fantasy. For now, he would have to settle on whatever scraps he could swipe. Something he was familiar with and something that would keep him safe.

But maybe one day he could hunt... once the Trail Killer had himself figured out a bit more. Once he knew the game a little bit better and was certain of his safety.

Until then, the shell of who everyone believed Matthew to be acted out his former life. He had gotten quite good at appearing how he was supposed to and going through the motions of his day-to-day activities without drawing suspicion. But it's not like anyone was watching, so who was he performing for?

He did make one small change to his life. He'd leave the house more often and walk around more than just the backwoods. Whenever he wasn't home, he wasn't required to act as expected. No one paid attention to him and knew how he was supposed to act. He didn't have to be over-the-top polite in an attempt to make people like him because for once in his life, he wasn't desperately begging to be seen and liked. It was too late for that. He tried so hard but now he'd accepted there wasn't a place for him here. No one would give him any comfort and he found it was much more comforting to take.

Unsurprisingly, Alfred didn't mention Matthew's escapades. He tried to not let it get to him. He would notice his twin's absence, but his twin lived in his delusional world without him. The pain hardly registered, only the truth he already knew.

Oh well, Matthew didn't think about it. Instead devoting his time to mapping out nearby areas and getting a feel of the atmosphere and patterns of each. One benefit to not being noticed is being able to notice everything without distraction. Matthew would just walk around, his face always resting as his sharp eyes peered through his glasses and observed. His hands were balled inside his plain red jumper and his fingers would run over the edge of the folded blade, reassured by the previously cold metal warmed by his burning heat.

He didn't wander at the same time or place each day, only whenever his restless mind took over his body. Today Matthew was wandering through the streets that were rife with life at 2 in the morning. It felt freeing to go wherever he wanted without anybody questioning him. Alfred probably didn't even know he wasn't in the house. He probably didn't even care to know. Either he was asleep or playing video games in his room, consumed by his own separate life without his twin. It was all too easy for Matthew to sneak out the window and he was free.

Buildings were loud with beats that made his heart thump to the tune. Everyone had been drinking too much to assume there was a world outside their friends huddled around them or whatever problems made them drink if they were alone. No one paid a sole wanderer any attention as Matthew strolled down the streets and took it all in. Once upon a time, being here was all Matthew could've ever hoped for. Not that he dreamed of becoming a drunk who stayed up long into the early hours of the morning, but just simply being here and having fun. He used to wish he had close friends who cared for him, likely to fill the hole his parents and own brother left inside of him. Instead, he slipped through the cracks of society and nobody ever reached out. Lonely and forgotten. He was destined to miss out on this milestone of human interaction, he would never bond with a friend over a drink, and he would never laugh as he watched someone attempt to dance to a song terribly off-beat because the liquor in their veins beat at the wrong rhythm.

He would never be included. As usual, his face showed none of his inner turmoil. As usual, no one paid him any attention.

But he was paying attention to everything going on around him, which led him to his inspiration. Matthew's hand tightened around the switchblade in his pocket. Perfect.

Across the street, he could see a familiar lone figure swaying against a light post with a bottle in hand and a scowl on his face. Matthew took note of the alcohol and distantly noted 'What are the

chances?' that two out of three targets had abused alcohol before he found them? Not that it mattered, if anything it would only make it easier for him.

All he had to do was think of a plan to kill Lovino Vargas. Now that Matthew had laid eyes on him, it was all he could think about.

Matthew and Lovino had hardly said a word to each other before, but Lovino left a strong impression on anyone who had the misfortune of crossing paths with him. Lovino's twin brother, Feliciano was in Alfred's friendship circle. Or one of them, anyway. Alfred had too many social circles. But the point remained that Matthew was bitterly jealous of Lovino. He and Feliciano were close like twins should be, and not just in a possessive way. Lovino would like it if people assumed as much because he wanted to be seen as callous and unfeeling. Another reason Matthew detested him.

Lovino was a bitter boy who would bite every hand that reached for him, regardless if it was a helping or hurtful hand. Matthew passively watched him as his insides churned with turmoil. Why did people bother with Lovino? Why did people love him when he was nothing but horrible? Why did people exhaust themselves to try and earn affection they'll never receive? Oh... Matthew knew that one. But he wanted to know why they kept trying with futile efforts to appeal to Lovino... and never Matthew. Matthew could only dream of being seen instead of used, much less having anyone try to reach out to him in a meaningful way.

He'd never reject it. Why the hell does Lovino spit on the blessings sent his way?

He was despicable. But so was Matthew. Which only proved how unfair the world was. He wasn't meant to be despicable but now he was made this way. Lovino got everything for nothing. Matthew got nothing as he gave everything. His hand tightened on the blade. This was his opportunity.

First, he'd have to check if Lovino had come with anyone. He didn't need anyone looking for their *dear* friend and get in the way. But how should he do that?

Matthew scanned the scene and noted the single camera facing towards the pub. He crossed the road and moved to the mouth of an alley leading to a parking lot out of sight from the camera. The camera would definitely get checked when Lovino's body was found. No one in their right mind would forget a character like Lovino and very quickly pinpoint him being here. Matthew peeked around the corner of the alley, he didn't want to get seen by Lovino's friends if he had any loitering about, trusting that the one time he *didn't* want to be seen would be the *one time* people noticed him.

"Hey Lovino," he called from the shadows. If he could just get him to step into the alley then he could ask any questions he wanted without worrying. "Lovino!"

At first, he didn't think Lovino heard him. He was about to call again when the Italian swung around on the lamppost and squinted his way.

"Fucking what?" Lovino said as he took a sip of his drink, completely unaware of his volume. Matthew cringed.

"Come here!" He called, keeping his voice barely audible in an attempt to force Lovino to come close to hear him.

"Speak up bastard!" Lovino replied and Matthew internally fumed. Why wouldn't he just come over here?

"Lovino come here," Matthew repeated with an urgency that Lovino just wasn't picking up on. Matthew relented and stepped forward. "Lovino come here so I can tell you something!"

"Tch, Alfred you fucking idiot," Lovino growled, becoming more aggressive. "I should've known you were a lying bastard. The fuck you are too sick to get out of bed!"

Matthew's fingers dug painfully into the switchblade. So Lovino thought he was Alfred, huh? Matthew wasn't a stranger to mistaken identity. It seemed that Lovino had invited Alfred out, and for whatever reason Alfred had lied. Matthew knew his brother wasn't sick, but why the hell would he brush off an invitation to have a fun night? He was friends with Lovino! Matthew wanted to know why he'd lied- But he could figure that out later, right now, he was Alfred.

"Yeah, luckily I got better," Matthew said and plastered a bright smile on his face as he played the part. "So who ended up coming out tonight?"

"Tch, only fucking Toni, and the bastard went home crying," Lovino's annoyance turned into ruthless anger. "I hope the bastard that took his best friend fucking rots on a putrid pile of shit."

Matthew blanked for a moment and stopped himself from verbally saying 'huh'??

Right, Antonio was best friends with Francis. Everything was coming full circle and Matthew could only see it from the outside.

"Shit, that sucks eh? When did he leave?"

"Pfft, the fuck if I know. That bastard left me alone ages ago. Good riddance."

Matthew didn't exactly trust the perception of time from a drunken man, but he'd have to take it. Hopefully, the only one who knew of Lovino's exact location was long gone.

"Yeah, sucks that he left you all alone. What are you going to do now?"

"Finish this and getting another," Lovino sneered as he skulled the rest of the bottle before ditching it on the sidewalk. It looked like he wanted it to smash, but instead, it just bounced and rolled towards the alley. Lovino cursed and kicked it, sending it flying into the dark car park where it hit something metal.

"You fucking coming or what?" Lovino said as he stumbled backward. "I haven't fucking got all night!"

Matthew would say that yeah, they did have all night, but he didn't want to deal with an explosive and attention-bringing Lovino. Why couldn't Lovino be any different when he was drunk? Why couldn't he be nice? Or sad? Or anything that would make Matthew understand why he acted like such an asshole all the time for seemingly no reason at all other than to be mean.

Matthew was reinvigorated to go through with what he came here to do and he would enjoy it. Now he had to just think about how he would go about it and how he could make an impact... Got it. Before Matthew hated Lovino for being horrible... he was jealous about how he was a stand-up

brother first. Wouldn't it be *poetic* if Matthew exploited the fact that Lovino actually cared about his twin?

"Actually, Lovino, the reason I came out tonight was because I got a call from Feliciano. He's in trouble and he needs your help."

"What?!" Lovino's brash voice was sharp as he lurched into action and Matthew edged back into the protective shadows of the alley. "That idiota! What kind of trouble? If anyone messes with him I'll make them regret it. Where the fuck is he?"

"I don't know, he isn't answering me anymore!" Matthew said in mock panic. "Can you try texting him? I'm sure he'll tell you!"

Lovino was muttering up a storm but offered no resistance to being told what to do when he took out his phone. For a single moment, Matthew could see something beyond spite and anger in his demeanour. Lovino was worried. Despite not being told exactly *what* was wrong with his brother or the nature of the emergency, he was quick to check on him and make things right.

Lovino was struggling to type and looked seconds away from throttling his phone as he brought it to his face and closed one eye like it would help him see the screen better.

"How many drinks have you had?" Matthew inquired. He wasn't entirely sure if it was normal for Lovino to have so much or not, but that was irrelevant now.

"Shut up. I'm trying to type," Lovino's fingers jammed on the screen and Matthew could only assume his text was riddled with typos. Lovino kept mumbling to himself but Matthew could only make out part of it. Something about how Feliciano was supposed to be safe at home and Lovino told him not to come out and stop him from drinking. Now Matthew had an angle and it seemed Lovino had a reason to believe him.

Now to get Lovino's phone. Matthew scanned the ground for something to use, something to prevent his fingerprints from leaving evidence on Lovino's phone. He spotted a flyer trampled on the ground. He picked it up and folded it around his hand.

"Hey Lovino? You should give me your phone and I can type for you. Feliciano will still get the message from you so he'll still answer."

Once again, Lovino surprised him by immediately stepping forward and holding out his phone. Matthew took it and then pretended to type as he walked around in circles, slowly leading Lovino deeper into the alley.

"I got a reply! This way!" Matthew started walking before Lovino could ask for his phone back, mindful to stay just out of reach. He'd just have to find the right time to discard it.

"Well? Fucking tell me, Alfred, is he ok?" Lovino huffed and followed, his eyes to the ground as he tried not to trip in the low light.

"I don't know," Matthew said as he scanned each path before he took it. He looked ahead for any signs of life or any objects protruding from the wall that could be a camera. All he had to do was take Lovino to a place where he wouldn't be discovered for at least a few hours and where they wouldn't be disturbed. When Matthew turned down another alley he tossed Lovino's phone in an open dumpster. When they turned down another sidestreet he crumpled up the flyer and stuck it

down a drain. He avoided residential areas as he led Lovino away from the lively streets he found him on, he couldn't tell what houses had cameras but it was a safe bet that most businesses did. Luckily most businesses had their cameras angled at the street, but not at the road. Matthew led Lovino off of the sidewalk and out of range of anything that could place what path Lovino took, from the pub to his grave.

Matthew had been so focused on route planning that he only assumed Lovino was following. When everything went quiet he didn't realise why that didn't bode well until it hit him. He spun around to make sure he didn't lose Lovino and while he was relieved that Lovino was silently following, Matthew was shocked to see glossy stains running down the abrasive boy's cheeks.

"What, idiot?" He snapped as he stumbled. "Don't fucking stop! Keep walking! Where's Feliciano?"

Matthew couldn't imagine Alfred crying over him because of worry. Matthew felt hollow.

"Why are you crying?" He asked blankly.

"I shouldn't have fucking gone out tonight. I just wanted to make that bastard Toni feel better and instead I made him feel worse and Feli told me it was a bad idea but I called him a fucking idiot. All I do is shit on him and yell at him and he just fucking cares about me. Fucking idiot. Now he's come out here to fucking meddle and now he's probably dying in some dirty shit-fucking alleyway instead of safe at fucking home because I ruin everything!"

Matthew didn't expect Lovino to actually articulate so well what was making him cry. Maybe he was an honest drunk and actually in tune with why he acted like an asshole? Matthew didn't know why he asked when he didn't expect an answer or expected 'shut the fuck up, it's none of your business.' Matthew and Lovino stood, opposite each other and Matthew actually saw Lovino. It took all this for Matthew to understand him, even if only a little, but that didn't change that Lovino chose to be horrible and push others away with his mind at 100% and his inhibitions up. It almost made Matthew not want to go through with his objective, if only so Lovino could change and fix what he knew was broken.

But Matthew knew that wasn't going to happen. People didn't change. And he was sick of catering and caring for those who would treat him like trash. He didn't owe Lovino anything.

But he still found himself saying, in a quiet voice, "Feliciano's fine. He just rolled his ankle and got lost. He hasn't been beaten up or anything, he just wants his brother."

Matthew felt ashamed at his strength that he changed the story, but he was still certain that Lovino would still follow. He loved his brother, after all.

Matthew found himself wondering if he'd rather have a brother who acted like an asshole to everyone but still loved deeply, or rather a selfish brother who forgot he existed but wasn't an asshole.

"Well, why didn't you just fucking tell me," Lovino huffed and rubbed his face into his forearm, but with drunken precision, he punched himself in the eye. "Hurry up and get there."

Matthew turned away from Lovino and kept walking. He already had a destination in mind.

"What will you do when you get to him?" Matthew asked with soft curiosity. Sue him, he wanted to imagine what it was like to have a loving brother, even if it was an asshole one.

"I'll give him a big fucking hug and yell at him for coming after me, that idiota." Lovino then went into a rant about how he should be able to destroy himself without bringing his 'good' brother down. Matthew let him rant as they approached where he had in mind. The park where the first two murders was big and stretched throughout the city. Through the next alley, he could see the dense dark outline of the forest as a void compared to the well-lit city. He stopped in the alley. The forest was his escape route only, not for his third kill. He just imagined it would be more meaningful if it was outside the bounds of his previous killings, but close enough that there was no denying the murder for what it was and who did it.

"Well? Where the fuck is he?" Lovino was holding himself up against the wall as he squinted to make out the shadows of the junk lying about the narrow road. "Feliciano!" He called out, his words morphed into soft and affectionate as he called out for his brother who wasn't there. Matthew had to act now. Before Lovino got louder with desperation or caught onto the fact that the pretence was all a lie. Matthew took the switchblade from his pocket and flicked it open in front of his face. Lovino's eyes squinted to try and figure out just what the hell was being shoved right in front of his nose when Matthew pulled back and swung. All too easily, the knife dragged across Lovino's neck as the sound of flesh tore and blood splurted and soaked both of them. A moment later Lovino's eyes bugged and a withering sound broke from his mouth as he stumbled against the wall and slid down. Matthew folded the knife and put it in the pocket of his now soggy jacket. He frowned and unzipped it, turned it inside out before putting it back on. He really should've planned ahead. He knew just how messy murder was. Oh well, the feeling of blood was uncomfortable between his jacket and shirt as it seemed to slide against his skin, but at least he couldn't see anything alarming on the outside now. Once again, he only looked pleasant on the outside. Nothing to see.

Lovino was gasping like a fish out of water as he sobered up fast. He seemed to be struggling to make out Matthew as he stood over him and Matthew wondered why he didn't feel like stabbing him more than necessary. It must've been because he actually spoke to Lovino, and he honestly spoke back. Not that it mattered now, he could see Lovino was fading fast.

"I'm *not* Alfred," Matthew said as he knelt down. "Do you know who I am?"

At first, he thought Lovino didn't hear or just wasn't capable of answering, but then he was pivoting his head and staring at Matthew with renewed horror.

"I'm Matthew. Alfred's twin brother," he introduced himself and bit his lip, unsure where to go from here. He could rant and rave about how Lovino was such an asshole and brought this upon himself, but he knew Lovino was already aware.

Lovino was weakly grabbing at his throat and trying to mouth something, to wheeze a desperate message out. Matthew would've predicted it was 'fuck you' or something equivalent if it wasn't for a frantic and pleading look on Lovino's face as tears caught on his chin before mixing with the blood.

"Ffff-ell-"

Lovino managed to suck in a large gasp of air and blood seeped between his shaking hands.

"Fff-lll...i-"

His eyes were pleading, either for Matthew to get the message or adhere to it. Matthew leaned in.

"Ffele-*chhh*," the sounds weren't coming out how he wanted them to and Matthew could see his frustration.

"Feliciano?" He asked, completely sure that was what Lovino was saying. Matthew's heart felt strange at the notion and he decided that going out of his way for a kind reassurance wouldn't hurt him. "Sorry. He's not here. He never was and he's safe at home. I lied."

Lovino gasped and kept clawing at his neck like it would prolong the inevitable and shook his head. Matthew was confused for a moment but then Lovino made a weak slashing movement and gestured to his neck before attempting to repeat his brother's name-

In the few interactions Matthew had with Feliciano, he was never mistaken for Alfred. Feliciano was always forgetting his name but Matthew just knew it was nothing personal. Feliciano was just an airhead and honestly treated everyone kindly. Sure his kindness was always aimed at those he loved and Matthew wasn't one of them, but he could let it go because even just as a stranger, Feliciano never treated Matthew wrong in any way.

"I'm not going to go after him," Matthew reassured. Even if he came across the other twin he just didn't see any motive to kill him or punish him at all. Though he was sure that Lovino's death would be punishment enough. Matthew felt guilty that his twin's death would upset Feliciano but there was nothing he could do for Lovino now. At least he knew that Feliciano was widely loved and had more than enough friends to help him get through this.

Upon hearing that, Lovino completely removed his hands from his neck and let them slump in his lap. Matthew stepped back until he bumped into the opposite wall. Lovino was still alive but he clearly knew it was too late as his eyes struggled to focus and no more blood was seeping through the wound on his neck. Matthew felt pressure building up in his chest when he realised that Lovino loved his brother so much he held long enough to make sure that nothing would happen to him.

Matthew couldn't take it and ran into the forest.

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It was hours later when he got home. Not because he was ultra, super careful, but because wandering in the forest always made him feel better. Now he was jealous of a dead man and his left behind brother because their broken love was stronger than *anything* his twin brother had for him.

Chapter End Notes

Tell me if you thought I was gonna spare Lovino! I was actually really considering it for a second there...
Anyways, any thoughts on who's next?

Chapter 5

After going through his post-kill routine and scrubbing himself clean of all evidence, Matthew slept in until just before midday. He didn't mean to sleep so long but it was a given when he had got out of the shower and could see the sky was getting lighter.

The house was quiet as he made himself "breakfast". He figured Alfred must be out and only God knows where. Maybe Alfred went out to get breakfast at McD's or something because Matthew wasn't up to make it. He checked the shelf that stored all the pre-mixed pancake batter he made and noted none were missing, so Alfred didn't make himself any for breakfast. Matthew was unsure if it was out of preference or laziness. It seems that McD's was the most likely theory, but in the end, he didn't really care where his brother was.

The sizzling of pancake mix on the hot pan was the only sound that emitted from the house. Matthew skillfully cut up banana and strawberries before nabbing the whipped creme and of course, maple syrup. He pulled the coffee table closer to the couch and sat in the middle, slumping into the soft cushions as he searched for the TV remote. He switched the TV and the station was already on the news. It seemed that it was the only channel used nowadays.

Matthew wondered if Lovino had been found yet. He supposed it was a 50/50 if he had been found *and* reported on.

He tried not to feel disappointed when there was nothing on the news. No Lovino and no discussion on the Trail Killer. Matthew turned the TV off and pulled out his phone as he enjoyed his pancakes. He wanted to be there when everyone realised that this was a serial killer and give him the credit he deserved.

He scrolled through the designated rumour forums and local pages in search of anything, any chatter about the Trail Killer or any indication that Lovino had been found. He hid a smile behind his fork when he came across a post of someone asking why they saw police sirens on the same block that Matthew was on last night. Matthew picked off a strawberry and ate it. That post was only 30 minutes ago. Lovino *must* have been found. Matthew would have to tune into the news tonight.

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Alfred hadn't shown up as Matthew made dinner, so he put his twin's portion in the fridge and sat on the couch by himself. Spiteful thoughts crossed his mind as he reached for the remote. *He should've only cooked for himself tonight.* Serves Alfred right for not communicating and potentially wasting food. Really, this habit only started because Matthew liked fresh meals so - since he'd be cooking anyway, he might as well make Alfred dinner too. He liked to imagine Alfred's shock at any change in this comfortable routine.

But the routine wasn't going to change and Matthew was resigned to it. He told himself that it didn't bother him.

He turned the TV on just in time to catch the start of the news program, the news presenter looked concerned as she announced the top story.

"The body of 23-year-old Lovino Vargas has been discovered just before 11 today. He suffered a slit throat only meters outside the same park where the bodies of Arthur Kirkland and Francis Bonnefoy were discovered. Police are treating these killings as connected and urging caution and vigilance to the public. Earlier today the chief of police released a statement-"

A smile crept onto Matthew's face as the scene changed to a policeman with a hat and collection of badges on a podium surrounded by microphones.

"As the method of murder is consistent with all of these cases and the shared location is concentrated within such a small radius of one another, we are looking at the very real possibility that this is the work of a serial killer. We want the public to know that we are taking this seriously and it is our top priority to prevent more killings and catch the criminal behind this. Until then, civilians are urged to be proactive and vigilant at night as the shared time of death between the three murders indicates the killer strikes at night. We are investigating possible links between the victims to understand a motive. Anyone with any information or suspicions is being asked to come forward. That is all."

He... he did it. On that first day when he was just releasing pent-up frustration by carving up a tree... he could've never imagined that it would all lead to this.

The news presenter frowned as she wrapped up the story before twisting her face to suit the tone of the next one. Matthew was done with the TV anyway, he turned it off and turned to his phone instead. He was practically buzzing as the internet exploded and talked about the Trail Killer. People were scared, curious, and angry. People were *feeling* and reacting to what he did. People were trying to investigate through their screens and theorise what the motive was and when the Trail Killer would strike next. People were even making memes about it! Most of them were out of touch in a distasteful kind of way, like whoever created them was an edgy teen who had never lost someone close to them. Others were ironic or concerned about what had happened.

Matthew took them all in stride. This is how he knew he had made it. No matter where he took his life nothing would compare to the attention he was getting by killing.

He wondered if Alfred knew about Lovino, though that was practically a guarantee. Alfred was always on his phone and so well connected that he would've heard as soon as the body was discovered. Matthew sighed as he debated checking Alfred's room. For what purpose, he didn't know. Obligation perhaps? Shouldn't he know where his *twin* was and what he was doing? Eventually, he settled for sending a text.

hey, your dinner's in the fridge

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Hours later Matthew's text was still on delivered. Matthew was no idiot. Alfred was always on his phone.

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The following morning Matthew set out to find a newspaper to add to his collection. That proved more tricky than he'd thought when he visited two shops to find they'd sold out. When Matthew stepped into a third shop the newspapers were the least of his concern when he saw his brother.

Alfred definitely wasn't home last night and wasn't around for breakfast. Matthew would've said something if *he* was going away for that long! Or at least the old Matthew would've... maybe. The old Matthew knew that no one would notice, but he'd still do the right thing and leave a note. Matthew was wondering how long he could run away for before Alfred would notice. That might be a vindictive idea to try later.

"Alfred," Matthew snatched his brother's sleeve to get his attention. Alfred was always so oblivious, not to mention he was on his phone. "Where were you?"

Alfred turned to look at him and his previous troubled face disappeared as he threw on his facade.

"Hey Mattie," he smiled and grabbed an armful of coffees from the wall fridge. "What are you doing here?"

Matthew answered by staring at him as he grabbed a newspaper. Alfred's face faltered.

"I um, didn't know you liked to read the paper," he chuckled. "You know you can get that stuff on the TV or the internet for free, right?"

"Of course I know that. I guess you just don't know me very well then, eh? Anyway, you didn't answer my question. Where have you been? You didn't tell me where you went."

Alfred shuffled his weight from foot to foot as his eyes brushed between Matthew and the newspaper, seemingly conflicted if to lie or tell the truth.

"Well, I guess you know Feliciano? Um, well, that was his brother. So me and a couple of friends are stayin' with him and his grandpa cus, y'know, it's hard for them..."

Alfred trailed off awkwardly but Matthew didn't make a move to let him leave. He knew Alfred had been missing before Lovino was found... was he with him all that time? From what Matthew learned from Lovino, he supposed that Feliciano was expecting him home at some point and he called his friends to help him search... they probably found him.

Matthew debated explicitly asking if Alfred found Lovino. Did Feliciano find Lovino too? Or was it just Alfred? Even if Alfred lied, he'd still get an answer as Alfred would react. He always did.

But another thought intruded into his mind. If Alfred was so close with Feliciano and saw what losing a twin did to him, why didn't Alfred change how he acted towards Matthew at all? Surely Alfred's brain would've compared Feliciano losing his twin to Alfred losing his twin. Matthew's stomach sunk... surely Alfred cared about him a little, even if it was just more than a stranger...

"Anyway," Alfred brought his hand to his mouth like he was about to be sick. Maybe finding the body of someone he knew was too much for him. "Um, can you hold this, I gotta piss real quick."

Alfred shoved the drinks into Matthew's arms and bolted to the back of the shop. The drinks felt heavier than they should be. Matthew wanted nothing more than to drop them where he stood, walk away and let Alfred come back to find them all over the floor. But even if he was a shell of his former self, now drained of the polite ceremonies expected of him, he wasn't going to do anything drastic. But he definitely wasn't about to stand around and wait for someone who would never do the same. Instead, he dumped the drinks into a basket and left the basket by the bathroom door Alfred had gone into. He pressed an ear against the door and, while part of him didn't expect to hear it, he was unsurprised when he heard retching. Matthew thought about going in there, catching him

in the act and forcing him into a confrontation. But that would be pointless and he didn't expect it to get him anywhere. So instead, he just paid for the newspaper and left.

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He went home and added the newspaper to his collection hidden away between folded shirts. Lovino's photo was the most flattering one he'd seen of him. He was smirking as he held up a lasagna for some competition. Matthew knew that Alfred had been there for that day. It was some kind of fair or carnival and Alfred had lost a pie-eating competition, though he claimed it wasn't a loss because he got to eat the pies. Matthew heard all about this afterwards because Alfred didn't invite him to it.

Matthew pushed the drawer shut as he thought about how many people must've been looking with Feliciano for his brother, and how many people stayed with him during the aftermath. All the support and love for Lovino wasn't taken away in his death... it was just passed onto Feliciano.

At least Feliciano deserved it.

Matthew wondered what Feliciano had that he didn't. Why didn't Matthew deserve any of it? The thoughts were passive and didn't cut as deep as they did before. They simply just happened as he let himself lay down on the hardwood floor and fade.

Chapter 6

Alfred didn't come home for a week. It was a complete surprise to Matthew when he did. He walked in and Alfred was just there, acting like he was here all along and the reason for his disappearance was only a distant memory.

It made Matthew upset, but he had a whole week to brood and now he was ready to poke and prod.

"Is Feliciano feeling better?" Matthew asked as he went to put the shopping in the fridge just to see it stocked with fast food and takeout. He scowled and pushed it aside.

"Yeah, he's feeling as good as he can be. He's got all his family over now so he doesn't need us there."

"I can't imagine what it must be like to lose my twin," Matthew said as he shut the fridge and leaned on the counter, watching for Alfred's reaction and hoping he'd rise to the bait.

"Yeah, luckily that's not something to worry about," Alfred shuffled uncomfortably and Matthew's heart squeezed. Everything he was meant to keep hidden was showing on his face because *what the hell* did that mean?

"You never know," Matthew forced out as he fought to get his face back in line so he could keep on acting. "There's a killer out there!"

"Well, you don't have to worry about me if that's what you're thinking," Alfred added, completely misunderstanding what Matthew was trying to dig at. "I can take care of myself!"

Matthew crunched the empty grocery bag in his hand as he thought about how to get the conversation back on track.

"Would you even care if I got killed?" He bit out before he could think better of it. Dammit, he was trying to slowly and painfully drag this along and now he's gone too far.

"Yeah, of course I would," Alfred said with dismissive confidence. "Who else would make pancakes that slap as hard as yours?"

Alfred stared at him like Matthew was expected to respond in a certain way but he had no idea what his brother wanted. He had no idea why his brother just couldn't love him as much as he loved the friends that he *always* put first. Matthew realised his face must be putrid right now, contorted in a way that wasn't passive and pleasant, a way that showed the hurt no one cared he had.

"You know I love you, right?" Alfred said as his smile slowly caved down.

Matthew wanted to say 'No, I don't,' but a calmness swept over him. Instead, he levelled Alfred with a stare and walked off to his room.

Alfred didn't come after him, but for some strange reason, he finally replied to that text Matthew sent over a week ago.

hey, your dinner's in the fridge
-1 week ago

thanks Mattie! <3
-1 minute ago

Matthew left him on read.

From now on, he had no brother. He already knew he had no parents. So not only was he an orphan, but he was a single child too.

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Matthew figured the funeral must've happened at some point. He didn't have an inkling when because Alfred didn't tell him when he was going or showed any signs of having been to a funeral, physical or emotional.

The news was still talking about the Trail Killer at every opportunity, even if no new details were brought to the table. Alfred was always on his phone during dinner but when the presenter announced the Trail Killer he'd put it down and desperately focus all his attention on the TV as if his attention alone would suddenly give police a lead. Matthew knew Alfred would rather not look at the TV at all, but his roommate's optimism always convinced him that 'this time, he'll get what's coming to him.' Alfred was always left disappointed and angered.

The internet was worse than the TV. The news was concise and filtered whereas the internet was not. Matthew enjoyed browsing the internet more for that reason. The memes were amusing and were showing no signs of coming to a halt as everyone had an opinion of the murders. The police never *confirmed* they were connected but just by acknowledging there might be a connection that had been enough for the public. Some prominent theories included that the Trail Killer lived in the park and hunted at night, whether it was a bored homeless person or something more... supernatural was unknown but highly speculated.

Matthew started browsing the internet in his room because the smiles from amusement were starting to become difficult to contain and were in no way appropriate to be seen by someone else.

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A couple of monotonous weeks had passed and Matthew didn't get another opportunity to add a newspaper to his collection, though his walks never stopped and he was confident he could find his way home from anywhere with his eyes closed. Maybe he should become a delivery driver. He'd never get lost and probably be given many opportunities to obsessively engage in his hobby.

It was a night like any other as he sat down on the couch with dinner in hand and Alfred at the opposite end. Matthew leaned his plate on the armrest instead of using the table and diligently waited for the news to come on. He didn't expect anything of note to be reported, but the one day he doesn't spend glued to the internet is the one day he gets blindsided.

"Top story tonight, the Chief of Police has made a statement confirming the murders of Arthur Kirkland, Francis Bonnefoy and Lovino Vargas are all linked. The police have named the Trail Killer the sole suspect and responsible for all three murders. Police have yet to discover a motive but confirm and warn that a serial killer is stalking the streets of this city."

"How good's that?" Alfred laughed humorlessly as he scowled. "I only have to find one asshole to beat up for killing all my friends."

"You're not searching are you?" Matthew asked, alarmed. If Alfred was actually actively searching then Matthew would have to know about it. Coming and going from the house would be compromised and so could just wandering the streets-

"No," Alfred said all too quickly, but Matthew could tell from his face that he really wasn't thinking about it before and now Matthew just gave him that idea... great.

The TV changed to the familiar police Chief Beilschmidt making his statement. Apparently, they decided the murders were connected because of the neck wounds. What genius figured out that three bodies within one area all sporting slit throats were connected. Matthew just knew that the internet would eat this up and spit out memes before the broadcast was over. It wasn't made known to the public until now that all victims had slit throats, but if they told everyone before then it wouldn't have taken an elite team to figure it out since it was so obvious.

Beilschmidt went on to say that the knife was the exact same length and size, holding up a model knife to demonstrate what it would look like. Matthew thought it was pretty accurate as he fiddled with the weapon in his pocket. A habit he doubted that anyone noticed. All in all, the statement held a whole lot of nothing and it was wrapped up with the usual plea for information. Matthew wondered if the Police thought it reassured the public that they begged for information.

He was so pleased at finally being labelled a serial killer that Alfred abruptly standing caught him off guard.

"Sorry Mattie," he chuckled and grabbed *both* of their plates. "I'm really tired so I'm going to go to bed now. Thanks for dinner! Goodnight, I love you!"

Alfred dropped the plates in the sink and darted off to his room. He thought he was so cunning but Matthew could see right through him and knew exactly what he was doing.

Matthew wasn't about to stop him, because he really couldn't. He wasn't going to try. Instead, he just turned to his phone to see the internet exploding over the confirmation of the Trail Killer.

An hour later, Matthew pushed open Alfred's bedroom door to find the room empty and the window open.

Matthew went to bed and didn't lose any sleep.

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No matter how hard Alfred tried to hide it, not that he tried at all, Matthew could see how obsessive he was about his delusions about catching the Trail Killer. Every night Alfred 'went to bed' earlier than he had before and in the morning would drink twice as much coffee. Bags formed under his eyes and his renewed vigour for his childish idolisation of superheroes returned as he openly fantasised about ideas far removed from reality. It was hard to think that people would say that Matthew was the ill-adjusted one.

Matthew never crossed paths with Alfred while he was hunting. While Matthew would take an opportunity to kill whenever it arose, Alfred had it in his mind that the Trail Killer was only active at night, completely forgetting that Arthur was killed closer to noon than nightfall. Sometimes

Matthew would return from his hunt hours before Alfred started his. Matthew never said anything to his brother about the fruitlessness of it all. Instead, he slept soundly for the entirety of the night while Alfred stalked around with a baseball bat no doubt bringing suspicion with his every movement.

Yes, that's right, Matthew wasn't oblivious to the fact that Alfred pulled out their old sporting supplies and now some not very innocuous makeshift weapons were missing. Considering the tension on the streets and the attitude of the public since the confirmation of a serial killer, it was only a matter of time before Alfred brought the wrong sort of attention and was rudely reminded that his heroic fantasies should remain as such.

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Though sometimes when Matthew couldn't sleep he'd walk around at night. Only now he had a dull sense of reluctance at the thought of crossing paths with Alfred. He tried to reason that it was unlikely. The city was big, Matthew was observant and would see Alfred first, if not then Alfred would just see right past him like he usually does and nothing would come of it. But still, for reasons unknown Matthew couldn't tolerate the thought of Alfred seeing him in his element, whether he noticed Matthew or not. Matthew knew trying to stop Alfred would never work, they were both as stubborn as each other. But he could find a way to work around it. Matthew would just have to find the right angle.

He brought it up during dinner. He and Alfred were on opposite ends of the couch and the TV was on, still talking about the Trail Killer. There wasn't any new information, only advice about how to keep safe and be aware of your surroundings. Matthew didn't think the advice really would've helped anyone he *did* kill, but it was probably just so the public felt safer.

Alfred was only halfway through his dinner so Matthew was on a deadline. Once Alfred finished eating and the news was over, he would 'go to bed' and Matthew would have to wait another night before getting what he needed from him.

"Hey Alfred," Matthew put his fork down and looked at his brother. "Where have you been going at night?"

Alfred choked and spluttered as his food went down the wrong hole. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth as he tried not to panic and die. Matthew stopped himself from sighing as Alfred took a moment to sort himself out.

"I'm not going anywhere?" He said dumbly, then laughed abruptly. "Do you mean clubbing? I hope I didn't disturb you when I came back in after a good night!"

"I know you're not clubbing. I know you're trying to find the Trail Killer-" Alfred quickly tried to deny it but Matthew just spoke over him. "I know I can't stop you and I'm not going to try but please at least share your location with me! How do you think I feel knowing you're out there all by yourself. At least give me the peace of mind that if something happens I can find you eh?"

Matthew made sure to pull his most concerned face. He was ready to argue tooth and nail to make Alfred keep him in the loop. Though he supposed if Alfred was too resistant... Matthew knew his password and could always get on his phone later. But at least having Alfred keep him in the loop consensually would help him avoid him better. Alfred might even stupidly offer information. It wasn't like Matthew could ever know what Alfred was thinking if he didn't hear it directly from him.

"You're not going to stop me?" Alfred seemed gobsmacked, which was how Matthew felt when Alfred didn't try to dig his heels in and deny what he was doing. "I would've thought you'd nag at me to stop."

Matthew gave Alfred a dead look as he thought about his next move.

"Well, Arthur was my cousin too."

Alfred looked much more serious at the mention of Arthur.

"Well I'm glad you understand why I have to do it then," he said, his voice gravelly. "That monster has killed three of my friends and all my other friends are fucked up because of it. Someone's gotta be a hero and put a stop to this."

Matthew wanted to point out 'That's what the police are for' but he was trying to get something from his stubborn brother so it was best to be as cooperative as possible.

"How often do you go out?"

"Pretty much every night. From when I go to bed after dinner to about, I don't know, 1 or 3 in the morning?"

Matthew hummed as he filed away the information.

"Where do you search?"

"Uhhh, I have a couple of routes that I cycle through. They all connect to the park though, since that's where everyone was found so I just search the city areas around the park perimeter too."

"That's quite a bit of distance. You should share your location with me so if something happens I can come help."

"I really don't want to bother you, Mattie. Besides, there's nothing I can't handle."

Now Matthew was getting frustrated. If only he and Alfred were friends, then he'd see the value in 'bothering' Matthew.

"I know you can handle it but it would just make me feel better since I'm not the one going out there. Please, Alfred."

Alfred seemed conflicted before sighing and rolling his eyes.

"Fine!" Alfred took his phone out. "There, happy? You can stalk me all you want now. Now you promise you won't try and stop me?"

"Yes I promise," Matthew said as he checked on his phone that he could see Alfred, satisfied that he was given 24/7 hour access to his life. "Thanks, Alfred."

Chapter 7

A couple of weeks had passed since Alfred gave him 24/7 access to his life and not much changed. Matthew scheduled his walks for the afternoon and arrived home in time for dinner - which he still shared with his talkative roommate, who described his heroic feats of looking after drunkards and making sure they got home before they were 'targeted'. Alfred was desperately leaning into the internet theory that the Trail Killer went after people who were drunk and therefore 'easy'. Matthew didn't point out that Arthur was sober and just continued to eat while Alfred talked *at* him, rather than with him. He'd been doing a lot of that recently.

After dinner, his roommate's shift started and Alfred left through the front door to go hunt down the Trail Killer. Matthew said nothing as he left and cleaned up from dinner while wondering if Alfred thought the streets were inherently safer because he was walking them. He probably did. He probably convinced himself that he could make a difference. He made sure Matthew knew that he was prepared to fight the Trail Killer and boasted about how he'd do it. Alfred would forget to chew as he got carried away giving a play-by-play telling Matthew exactly where he'd swing his baseball bat at that 'son -or daughter!- of a bitch.'

Once Matthew's obligations were taken care of, he'd crash into his bed and stalk Alfred's location from his phone. Throughout the weeks he had mapped out all of Alfred's routes and timed them. It wasn't long before Alfred became predictable and Matthew would be able to map out his location even without the tracker. His paths did vary, but it started to make sense and was forseeable.

It wasn't long before Matthew felt comfortable edging towards Alfred's territory. The wide berth in his mind slowly shrunk and the streets he could roam became bigger. Nothing was off limits anymore. He could go where he wanted and whenever he pleased. If he happened to be on the streets at the same time as Alfred, he didn't have to worry about crossing paths.

Tomorrow night, he would walk out the front door after Alfred had left and he would continue his hunt and leave another mark on the world.

Mornings passed as normal, only now Alfred was a little more open about the effects of his not-so-secret nightly activities. He would drink twice as much coffee and hogged a shelf in the fridge to store his energy drinks. How long until Alfred crashed and burned? Matthew never said anything, even when it looked like his roommate was trying to attract attention so Matthew would question him and he could share his heroic adventures. No matter how Alfred would talk at him, Matthew kept his eyes glued to his phone and tuned him out. He didn't have the mental capacity that Alfred demanded he loan. Now more than ever, the weight of the emotional labour he performed for his brother for the entirety of his life was starting to finally crush him.

But this morning, Matthew must've woken up on the wrong side of the bed. That or not stalking the streets at night how he pleased had finally caught up to him. He was sick of feeling like he was cornered and he was hoping to never feel that way again.

Alfred was 'talking to himself' and running unnecessary commentary about whatever menial thing he was doing. Matthew knew damn well that if he wasn't in the room then Alfred wouldn't be 'talking to himself', proving that Alfred was trying to get attention. Matthew tried to tune him out but found that he just couldn't. His lip curled up in annoyance as Alfred droned on and occupied Matthew's mental space against his will.

"Why are you still talking?" Matthew stated as he glared from his phone. Alfred gave him a smile that made him sick.

"Um, because I can? Am I not allowed to talk to myself?"

Matthew's eyes bore into him as if he could kill him by staring hard enough. Fury raged inside him as he sat perfectly still and he thought about giving in and screaming.

But arguing was pointless. Alfred was fucking stupid and stubborn. Matthew would never get him to change. He wanted to save himself the trouble of trying, of making his voice raw by arguing back and Alfred just nonchalantly brushing him off even though he can see how much he was pissing Matthew off-

Matthew just wanted to make Alfred hurt as much as he hurt. He wanted to punish him.

And he had an idea.

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Tonight he was finally going to get back on the streets after dark and he was looking forward to it. He could hardly sit still or keep a smile off his face as he thought about what he was going to do to commemorate such an occasion.

He made dinner, as usual, only this time he served one plate. When Alfred came in, he took it and sat on the couch without even noticing. He turned on the TV and a minute passed before he realised that Matthew wasn't coming and turned to see where he was. Now it was time for Matthew to act.

"I'm not feeling too well," Matthew said, his voice faint and strained as he leaned heavily on the counter. "Um, can you please put dinner away and clean up? I'm going to go to bed... Please don't disturb me."

"Uhh okay," Alfred looked concerned as he put his plate down slowly and made to stand up. "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yeah," Matthew quickly reassured. The last thing he needed was for Alfred to step up and look after him. "I just didn't drink a lot of water today and now I have a migraine. I'm just going to sleep it off. Please don't worry about me. Just be safe when you go out tonight."

"I'm always safe," Alfred grabbed his plate and kept eating. "Goodnight bro. I hope you feel better tomorrow."

"Night," Matthew said and shut the door to his room, flicking the lock as he dropped his facade. He changed his clothes and put on a surgical mask, just to be safe. It had been a while since he'd been out at night and he was just a little nervous, although he knew he shouldn't be. *He* was the reason people were nervous, but he couldn't afford to drop his guard. The city had a different vibe at night and even though he never stopped roaming around, from his afternoon walks he could tell that attitudes had shifted.

Without a second thought, he grabbed the backpack from beside his bed and put it on before leaving through his window. There were people out and about, but it seemed that there was a lingering tension. People walked with a purpose and there weren't as many people just loitering

about like Matthew had seen before. The confirmation of the Trail Killer had changed the attitude of the whole city and Matthew was both bewildered and honoured that he was the cause of this.

He quickly approached one of the areas Alfred usually patrolled and walked straight into it. It wasn't an area that Alfred would head to *first*, but one that he *always* passed through at some point during his patrols. It was an industrial area with a few bars in between. There were plenty of alleyways winding between wide and empty roads. It was only a couple of blocks away from the big forest park but the few people that were around were completely unbothered, loitering and chatting completely carefree.

Matthew stuck to the shadows as his eyes scanned around. He moved slowly now, sure that this was his area to strike. He avoided every camera he could see and even where he was sure cameras would be even if he couldn't see them. During his afternoon walks, his mind wasn't so focused on murder but more on the logistics. Like where cameras were always placed. After observing so many it was second nature to avoid them.

He had his back against a wall as he peered out from the narrow opening and into the alley across the street. He was just keeping his eyes peeled for anyone, nobody specific, but someone who was alone and in a convenient area. He was determined to kill again tonight.

His heart jumped to his throat when metal grated behind him and he whipped his head around to see someone had come out of the door behind him. He was frozen as he watched, afraid to move and make himself known before he could gauge the situation. It was a woman with long silvery hair tied up in a ponytail with a pale blue bow. She was facing away from him and hadn't noticed him yet. She was lugging a garbage bag to the dumpster and once she put it in she'd presumably turn around and see Matthew. He had to make a choice and make it now. Either he left before she saw him... or he had just found his perfect target. All he had to do was get a clear shot of her neck without risking touching her and he would be successful.

His hand played with the switchblade in his pocket as he tip-toed forward and peeked inside the still-open door. It looked just like a cluttered warehouse full of storage units and he couldn't see or hear anyone inside. He pushed the door shut with his shoe, causing her to snap around and look at him. Her eyes narrowed as she tossed the bag in the dumpster, completely unbothered at not being alone.

"What are you doing here?" She said with such animosity that it took him by surprise. His heart stilled instinctually and his brain was searching for why she wouldn't like him. It ticked him off. It shouldn't matter if she liked him or not and he was sick of giving up so much of himself to try and make people care. Her abrupt attitude just told him he made the right choice in picking this person.

He had no idea how to respond and he quickly racked his brain for an answer that would lower her guard and give him an opportunity.

"I'm just walking around," he shrugged, grimacing at his weak and questionable response.

"Sure you are," she glowered and crossed her arms like she'd caught him. "You're here to bother my brother, aren't you?"

What?

"...Your brother?" He prompted, hoping he could get more information.

The woman rolled her eyes.

"Why do you insist on playing stupid? If you're here to bother Ivan he left half an hour ago."

Matthew wasn't stupid. This had happened so many times in his life that he just knew it was happening again. It happened with Lovino too. Why was this becoming a pattern? She thought he was Alfred, didn't she?

Actually, this was perfect. His victims thought he was someone they knew and trusted meant they lowered their guard without him having to do anything.

"Dang, I was hoping to scare him," Matthew jested as he loosened his posture and a smile naturally came to his face.

This was perfect, actually. Tonight's commemoration couldn't go any better. He wanted to punish his brother by making him find whoever he chose to kill, so not only would he feel helpless as he stumbled upon the body, but if the body was *another* one of his friends? Perfect...

It seems that his victims had something in common beyond being questionable people. Being friends with Alfred made you a target. Maybe Alfred would start to blame himself, but Matthew really couldn't see that happening. He'd only see it as a coincidence but he'd be hurt all the same.

"You would not have been successful," the woman stated as if it was a fact. It very well could've been. Matthew knew of Ivan from Alfred ranting about him that Alfred was bothered by Ivan's unbotheredness. Once Ivan came to their house and treated him like he was nothing the entire time, at one point Ivan sat on him and pretended he didn't notice his chair was squirming and trying to shove him off. Alfred never said anything about the bullying. Surprising, considering how much he likes to think of himself as a hero and peacemaker.

He could just tell that this woman was close to Ivan and Matthew could only hope that Ivan loved his sister just as much. He couldn't have come across a better person. It seemed that by killing this woman he was killing two birds with one stone.

"Yeah, good thing that's not what I was here to do," Matthew said as he lunged forward with the blade and dragged it across her neck. She reacted and tried to stop him, but was too slow as blood sprayed on the wall beside them and he narrowly avoided her retaliation as he jumped backwards. Her eyes were full of murderous intent as she didn't even try to stop the bleeding, instead putting all her efforts into grabbing him as she unsteadily pounced forward. A distorted guttural growl was ripped from her throat as she tried to wrap her hands around his neck. He darted to the side to avoid her and jammed his shoulder against the brick wall. She tried to quickly pivot but tripped and slammed into the ground. Even then she didn't give up and she tried to use the wall to stand again. But she was swaying like a stick bug in the breeze and Matthew cautiously watched with his knife posed as she went to stand but crumpled with a wheeze. Her eyes never lose her defiant hate as they lock onto Matthew's. She returned his gaze with a carefully guarded stare.

"It's nothing personal," he says as if it would help. He doesn't even know her name, it's just the thrill of killing and the want to punish that drives him. He could've picked anyone tonight and would've been happy if Alfred found them. "I'm the Trail Killer."

With the last of her strength, she threw her hand towards him, fingers positioned as if claws and she grated them along the ground like she was trying to pull herself closer. Matthew wondered why she was fighting so hard, though it could've just been instinctual. Some people were just built to be

strong and others were just weak. He detested that the world saw him as the latter all because of his demeanour. No one knew that when tested he would pass with flying colours.

But he wanted them to know. The whole internet knew and the city was waking up to it.

Matthew continued to stare at the woman, now unmoving but her eyes stayed fixed on him. Her eyelids fluttered minutely and there was still a light behind them. He watched it extinguish.

He pocketed the knife and shrugged the backpack off, taking out the jumper inside and sliding it over his damp shirt. There was a pair of sweatpants that he slid over his now sticky jeans. There was nothing he could do for his shoes but he covered most of the incriminating evidence so he would just have to hope no one noticed. He used cleaning wipes to scrub his hands before tossing them in the backpack and putting it back on. He sighed and cast one last look back at the woman.

The position she was slumped in would be really uncomfortable if she were alive. Matthew felt sorry for her but knew better than to move her. Touching would only leave evidence. With a satisfied feeling of accomplishment and swelling excitement for what was surely to come, he eagerly made his way home.

Chapter 8

Matthew got home without issue, as expected. And as expected, Alfred wasn't home. He quickly went through his cleansing ritual as excitement ushered him on. He couldn't wait to see the outcome of tonight. He was eager to see the reaction to having another kill under his belt. It filled him with a hunger for more, urging him to discover just how high he could take that number.

He tucked himself back into bed with his phone clasped in hand as he checked Alfred's location. He frowned when he saw that Alfred wasn't where the body was but anticipation lit up inside of him when he noted that Alfred wasn't far from it. All he had to do was move a couple of blocks down...

In the end, the exhaustion from his earlier excitement finally caught up with him. His tiredness overcame him and he fell asleep before he found out if Alfred made the discovery or not.

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When he woke up far earlier than he would naturally, he didn't really think much of it. It was too easy to assume that Alfred was being inconsiderate again. Considering how often it happened and how Alfred was characterised by being loud and disruptive, you'd think that Matthew would be used to it. Maybe he'd gotten used to Alfred sleeping in during the morning.

Memories of last night filled him in as he realised why his glasses were already on his face and why his phone was right next to his head, on his pillow instead of charging on the bedside table. He held his breath and strained to make out the noises outside his room as he read the time. It was a little before 6 in the morning, which was definitely earlier than Alfred would ever wake, even before he started venturing out at night...

Matthew was wide awake now as he stalked his roommate's location, showing that right now, he was definitely in the house and no doubt the reason for Matthew's rude awakening. The voices on the other side of the door grew louder, and closer, but did not become clearer. If anything they blended together more, like a marker being smudged with water. But there was definitely more than one person out there, leaving Matthew to wonder who was with Alfred. But he had a feeling he knew the answer.

Alfred wouldn't wake up at this time, instead, it was more likely that he was *already* awake and never slept. And if he never slept, that meant...

Matthew cruelly smirked as he looked at Alfred's location history. If Matthew had to estimate, he killed Natalya sometime between 11 and 1130. He had gone out early that night if only to get a head start on Alfred. His grin stretched on his face as he saw that his unsuspecting victim stopped right where he wanted him to. A little before 12, Alfred found her. Matthew could only imagine how he would've reacted. He was equal parts disappointed he didn't see for himself but pleased to know his plan worked out.

But why did Alfred stay out so long? Matthew quickly reasoned that Alfred would've called the police and moving through his location history proved that he was at a police station up until 20 minutes ago.

Feeling a sudden urgency, he untangled himself from his covers and crept towards his door. He badly wanted to see what state Alfred was in, aware it was time-sensitive as the police officer with him wouldn't stick around for long. Matthew couldn't trust Alfred to tell him the truth... but maybe the police officer-?

He cracked the door open.

"Alfred?" He said softly with a yawn. "What's going on?"

Alfred was standing in the hallway with a police officer that Matthew really shouldn't have been surprised he recognised considering Alfred knew everyone and claimed to be friends with the world.

Despite Ludwig's ever-present stern and professional demeanour, Matthew could see bags under his troubled eyes. But he was more interested in Alfred's appearance. His eyes were bloodshot and sunken, his face was pale and he just didn't look right. There was a vacant look on his face that he seemed to fight when he realised that Matthew was there.

"Mattie," Alfred tried to smile, but it was like he'd forgotten how and it came off as a grimace. "I um, it's nothing. Don't worry about me- It. Uh, just go back to bed."

Any frustration Matthew felt at being brushed off, he carefully kept off his face. He wanted all the details and he was going to try his best to get them.

"Alfred, are you okay? You look terrible..."

Alfred's grimace wobbled and his eyes darted to the floor. Matthew was going to poke some more when the police officer stepped in.

"He's fine, physically. I'm just advising him that he looks after himself for a while."

"Why's that?" Matthew appealed. "Did something happen? Alfred, why is there an officer here?"

Alfred didn't react further than running a hand through his hair and the police officer looked between them, seemingly debating something.

"Considering the nature of tonight's events, it's likely this won't be considered confidential. No doubt it'll be on the news everywhere first thing in the morning," the police officer said, though it seemed he was talking to himself. Then he put a hand on Alfred's shoulder. "I think you should stay away from the news for the time being."

"Why's that?" Matthew repeated.

The police officer faltered as he debated how to phrase it before settling on the most direct route.

"Alfred discovered a body last night."

Alfred kept staring at that spot on the floor as the hand in his hair turned into a fist and pulled.

"Fuck, if I was just a little earlier..." His wavering voice was hoarse. "She..."

"It wouldn't have made a difference," Matthew said, a little too pointedly. But he was right, Matthew would've found someone regardless just for Alfred to find.

"He's right," Ludwig confirmed. "You cannot blame yourself."

But Matthew knew he would. Hoped, even.

"Yeah, you're right. Obviously I know which asshole did this. It was the fucking Trail Killer!"

"How do you know it was the Trail Killer?" Matthew turned to Ludwig. "Wouldn't you know if it was?"

"Well... I have suspicions that it was *inspired* by... that individual. But it's only an assumption at this stage. An investigation would help us make an educated guess, but if it isn't a copycat it could be completely unrelated-"

"No! I just know it's not!" Alfred yelled, making Matthew jump. Ludwig only sighed like he'd been through this before. Chances are he has, if Alfred had been with them all night, then the officer would have witnessed many other outbursts. "I just know it was the Trail Killer!"

"Alfred-" the officer sighed.

"I'm *sick* of MY FRIENDS being fucking KILLED by this ASSHOLE!" Alfred had both hands twisting in his hair. "*Fuck*!"

Ludwig grabbed at his wrists and tried to stop him, but Alfred just kept repeating himself. Matthew watched with mixed feelings, a little bit of pride, but mostly... a bad feeling he couldn't name. He felt bad about what he did to Alfred now that he saw what was happening. Matthew meant to hurt him... but now he was feeling uneasy. He reminded himself that Alfred would bounce back, just like he did with Arthur and Francis and Lovino - Matthew wondered if Alfred reacted like this after finding Lovino. Probably not, if only for Feliciano's sake.

But that wasn't what troubled Matthew. Now he felt double bad because despite the fact he decided that Alfred wasn't his brother, why did he still care about him?! Why did he keep pining for an acceptance he knew he wasn't going to receive?! Matthew wished he could just turn off his feelings and make this easier.

"Maybe..." Alfred sucked in a shuddering breath. "Maybe it should've been me!"

"That's enough!" Ludwig said sternly.

Matthew's guilt was just as heavy as his confusion. Surely Alfred knew that his dying would *not* stop the killings. Surely Alfred knew that no one *had* to die, and Alfred hypothetically swapping his place out with someone else wouldn't solve anything. It would still cause hurt. How could Alfred say that knowing that he still had friends who were alive that would be hurt by his being gone? Everyone *always noticed Alfred's absence, except Alfred apparently. And how... how could Alfred say that right in front of Matthew? Didn't Alfred ~~know~~ assume that Matthew cared for him? Even if Alfred didn't care for Matthew, why would Alfred not assume that Matthew cared for him??

"Do you mean that Alfred?" Matthew inquired.

"Wha-? Mattie?" Alfred's large eyes locked onto him and Matthew knew had forgotten he was there. His stomach twisted.

Ludwig took that opportunity to pull Alfred's hands away.

"Get some rest, Alfred," he said and turned to Matthew, his eyes both frustrated and pleading. "Can I count on you to look after him?"

Matthew just nodded.

"Alfred," Ludwig tried again, "As a police officer I'm ordering you to stop going out at night. It's dangerous-"

"I can handle it!" Alfred snapped. "Someone fucking needs to!"

"We have teams patrolling, trained teams who want to protect civilians like you. So make our job easier and keep yourself safe!"

Alfred was about to snap back but Matthew cut in.

"Will that be enough?" He said, faux concern disguising his digging. "I mean, how many people are on the lookout? What if they're in the wrong areas? Maybe if you told Alfred it would make him feel better and he wouldn't go out at night!"

Ludwig looked conflicted, no doubt knowing this was heavily confidential information, but Matthew could see him weighing up the odds as he pinned Alfred's arms.

With a little bit of questioning, Ludwig told them anyway.

Matthew kept his smile from his face as he nodded along to everything he prompted Ludwig to say and Alfred slowly pulled himself back together.

"Look after him," Ludwig said and then sent Alfred a conflicted look. "Don't go out at night. If not because it makes you a suspect and gets you into trouble with the law, if not because a police officer is ordering you to, then do it because I'm asking you. As a friend. I don't want to find you somewhere you shouldn't..."

Alfred looked like he was about to argue again, so stupid yet so typical of him.

"Think of your friends," Ludwig added. "Think of Feliciano."

Alfred's face twisted up again.

"I'm grateful you were there for him," Ludwig disclosed. "But I don't think he'd cope well losing anyone else."

Alfred's shoulders slumped, finally defeated. All he could do was nod and the officer was finally satisfied.

"Good. Now you know I'm letting you off with a warning but don't do anything stupid again. I know you think vigilantism is cool but with the current climate as it is, we can't have individuals walking around with anything that could be used as a weapon. I know your character and that you wouldn't be capable of it, but others do not. It's important we don't add to the civil unrest."

Again, Alfred just nodded, his eyes cast down.

When the police officer finally left, the two brothers just stood there for a moment. Matthew wondered if Alfred had forgotten he was here again. He felt like he was intruding even though he

was in his own home.

"Alfred," Matthew decided to break the silence, if only so he could move on from it. He reached for his brother's arm but Alfred flinched back. Matthew halted with a jolt that pierced his heart.

"I'm uh," Alfred kept his eyes down as he put his facade up. "Imma go sleep it off."

Matthew could only stand there as Alfred brushed past him and the door to his room clicked shut as he locked it. Matthew could only keep standing there with blank eyes as he stood, staring at the spot Alfred had just been in.

He couldn't name his feelings, only that they were intense and his mouth tasted weird.

Part of him wanted to slaughter *all* of Alfred's friends, just to get back at him for the intense hurt he had caused that was now circulating through Matthew's fragile system and leaving his heart shrivelled like a prune.

But another part of him was reluctant. Maybe he should take a break from killing Alfred's friends. Especially when it would make Alfred so... what was the word? Irregular? Matthew couldn't name what Alfred's behaviour was like now, but he knew he pitied it.

At the very least, a wider range of victims - truly random victims - would prevent the police from narrowing their suspicions... If they had any. He didn't expect they would be capable of pinning him.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the next week, neither Matthew nor Alfred went out at night. Alfred's sleep schedule was still irregular and he still consumed ungodly amounts of caffeine, but Matthew was pleased that he wasn't annoying in the mornings anymore. Or rather, whenever Alfred's 'mornings' were. Alfred started sleeping into lunchtime whenever he could, which was something he'd never done before. He didn't acknowledge the change in routine, so neither did Matthew.

A week later, Alfred had more or less gotten back to normal in terms of personality. He didn't go back out at night but Matthew knew he wanted to. Matthew could see his brother's unrest whenever the Trail Killer was brought up on the news and Matthew always knew when Alfred was looking at something about it on his phone. It couldn't be healthy and Alfred's eyes were always bloodshot. He was constantly consuming any discussion of the Trail Killer he could find and was completely unaware of how snappy and unpleasant it was making him.

And that wouldn't have affected Matthew too much if Alfred wasn't home more often than not. It was like he never left the house anymore. More often or not Alfred was hiding in his room, where at least Matthew wouldn't constantly be subject to his irate brother. But for some reason, Alfred's behaviour and attitude still annoyed him. It made him itch with the urge to do *something* to harm his brother again, to get back at him just so he felt in control again.

But he didn't want to take the extreme route first, so Matthew decided he'd confront Alfred about it. Then one night Alfred said he wasn't having dinner at home because he was going out. Matthew was more than happy about that, finally having the house to himself meant he could watch whatever he wanted on TV and sit in the living room while on his phone in a completely silent house. Opposed to hiding in his room like he had been lately to get some peace of mind. Exciting stuff, he knew.

So Alfred left and Matthew sat in the middle of the couch as he ate his dinner and watched TV about the Trail Killer while browsing forums about the Trail Killer on his phone. Did it make him a narcissist? He was just honestly really interested in what the public's perception of him was. Obsessively interested. It was all too amusing to him. Matthew was nobody while the Trail Killer was almost a celebrity, despite no one actually knowing much about the criminal. Leaving everything to entertaining speculation.

Even weeks later, everyone was still talking about Natalya and what happened that night. The chatter didn't settle at all. People didn't like that the killings were creeping out of the park and into the city. The general consensus was that nobody felt safe now as a blanket of paranoia swept over the city. Lovino died just on the border of the park so it was a grey area if it was to be considered to be *in* the park or not. But everyone agreed *that* murder was the Trail Killer even if it wasn't strictly *in* the park.

But for Natalya, there was no grey area for the location she was found. She was out of the park and there was still a hot ongoing debate if it *was* the Trail Killer or a copycat. The police's initial statement was vague yet urging caution did not stop the debate at all.

He really should add something to the debate. As the Trail Killer. Just to see what happens and give the public something new to fuss over. That was an idea to consider...

Maybe the first step would be to give himself a brand. An M.O. A signature. Something that would stop copycats from claiming his work and make it easier for the police to come to the obvious conclusion of who the Trail Killer was responsible for killing.

Matthew was consuming every piece of entertaining knowledge he could when the opening of the front door made him jolt. Alfred stormed in, slamming the door behind him, the resulting clatter reverberating through Matthew's entire body. He willed away the tension in his body as he relaxed back onto the couch.

"You're back early," Matthew said, knowing, hoping that in this state Alfred would be less concerned with putting up a facade and more likely to actually share details.

"Yeah, well, fucking Ivan was there," Alfred spat as he dug through the fridge and pulled out the dinner Matthew had made, all while continuing to rant to himself.

"Him and his stupid pleasant face, just smiling is so gross. Like, couldn't he just fucking, I don't know? Not show up for once? Does he have to come to every fucking friend event we have-?"

Matthew knew of Ivan and Alfred's weird frenemy relationship, but he knew this reaction was too extreme. For Alfred to be getting food and with how long he'd been gone - which wasn't long at all - Matthew figured Alfred had shown up, saw Ivan and immediately left.

"Why was Ivan there a problem?"

From what Matthew could pick up, the only problem was Alfred saw Ivan, which was a stupid reason to be upset and an even more stupid reason to leave. Alfred had told him before that he enjoyed hanging out with Ivan, and even if he didn't always like him Alfred couldn't deny he was entertaining.

"Tch, it's not," Alfred said bitterly, tapping the counter with irritation as he waited for the microwave to finish. "It's *def-in-ite-ly* not."

"You're acting like it's a problem."

"It's not a problem!" Alfred seethed. "I mean, good for him! He's all fine and dandy! Like his sister isn't even *dead*. Like she didn't fucking die in some dusty alleyway-!"

Hmm, there it is. Matthew sighed and turned off the TV, still showing an extended program about such current affairs. Probably not helpful right now and it could distract Alfred from sharing information.

"-How can he just pretend that he's fine! He shouldn't be fine! He should be fucked up! But then he looks like he doesn't even fucking care because here he is hanging out with everyone. And guess what? He was *fine* at the funeral too. The sick fuck almost looked happy to be there. Like *too* happy. It was *creepy*. I couldn't even be near him. I haven't even spoken to him since before- uh, I- I won't fucking speak to him again if he's just going to act *weird*-"

So Alfred was upset that Ivan wasn't showing he was upset. Matthew rubbed a hand down his tired face as he thought about what his brother had in common with Ivan. Again with the facade. Then a

bitter thought entered his mind. Why was Alfred upset and dictating how Ivan should act when Matthew knew damn well that Alfred wouldn't be too upset if Matthew was removed from his life, through violent circumstances or not. Why was Alfred upset about someone else's sibling but not ever concerned about his own?!

So Matthew let Alfred rant, exhausted at the prospect that this was all his sibling used him for. At least if it made Alfred feel better he might not act so weird all the time.

The microwave beeping cut off Alfred's ranting and he visibly withdrew within himself as he pulled the plate out with a shaky hand. Matthew moved over on the couch, expecting Alfred to sit down but instead his brother just stared at his plate.

"I'm gonna eat in my room, actually," he muttered after a moment before ducking into his room before Matthew could say anything otherwise. They'd agreed they'd never eat in their rooms and always shared their dinners. Now Alfred was breaking that one rule!

Matthew was frozen on the couch and ignored the way Alfred's door echoed around the quiet house. Was he always destined to be left alone in the quiet?

He wasn't hungry anymore but the frustration that made him *want* to punish Alfred again was swelling. He restrained himself from showing it on his face and remembered he decided on a confrontation first.

Matthew's hands trembled as he put his plate down on the coffee table, finding the clink much too loud. Why was he upset? All he knew was that Alfred caused it and now the trajectory of his night had changed.

It felt like there was only one thing he could do to ease the upset eating him up. And that would be to sink a knife into the first available victim. It didn't even need to be someone Alfred knew.

No. Confrontation first. He couldn't let Alfred do what he wanted. He'd never *overtly*, explicitly confronted Alfred before and the idea made him jittery. With his turbulent emotions came vindication and exhilaration. His reluctance had eroded and the need for confrontation, to blame and use guilt to punish those who had wronged him was too much to not give in. With a resolved clatter he put his phone down on the table and stalked straight to Alfred's door.

"Alfred," he knocked sharply, "we agreed we wouldn't eat in our rooms."

"It's just one time!" Alfred's reply was muffled by a mouthful of dinner. "Leave me alone!"

Matthew balled his fists and grit his teeth as he thought about what to say, what angle to take to lead this where he wanted to go.

"You say it's 'one time' but then you'll keep doing it and your room will start to smell-"

"Who cares? It's my room!"

Matthew really felt like pounding on the door in response to his brother's stubbornness. Could Alfred see he was just trying to help him?

Oh... that could work.

Matthew took a big breath in and slowly let it out, willing his anger to flow out and loosen his body.

"Alfred, I'm just worried about you," Matthew's tone was pleading and insistent. He recalled feeling obliged to insist just like this before he snapped. Always begging others to let him in and help. It took a lot out of him, but at least it was perfect practice for getting what he wanted now. "Please talk to me, you've gone through a lot and it makes me upset that you're shutting me out."

Now the ball was in Alfred's court and it would make him look bad if he, metaphorically speaking, ignored it or threw the ball away.

Alfred groaned but Matthew didn't hear him move.

"Look - I'm fine, alright? I don't mean to be angry but it's just Ivan, y'know?" Alfred laughed like that was all the explanation needed. "I promise I won't eat in my room again but come on, it's one time! It's not that I'm shutting you out or anything, I just want to be alone. You like being alone! Is that so bad?"

"Yes. You've been acting weird all week and I'm worried. You've never left early when you're hanging out with your friends before-"

"It's not that I *bailed* on them," Alfred muttered.

"They've probably noticed that you're acting weird too."

"I doubt it. They didn't see me tonight."

So Alfred left before they could see him because he saw Ivan was there.

"Does Ivan know you found his sister?" Matthew asked perceptively.

"*No*."

"You should tell him."

"I don't want to tell him," Alfred said too fast.

"Why not?"

Alfred's phone started ringing but stopped just as quickly. But Matthew didn't hear voices, so Alfred must've declined the call. His friends must be worried considering it was so out of character for Alfred to seemingly not show up, especially without giving an excuse.

"Ugh, again? Just fuck off," he mumbled and Matthew generously ignored it.

"He's your friend, eh? Why won't you tell him?"

"Cus it'd just be a big thing and I don't really wanna open a can of worms right now."

"But it might make you feel better and stop being so weird. You need to stop shutting people out."

"And what? You think *I'm* shutting Ivan out? There's no point in telling *him*! Not telling him doesn't mean I'm shutting him out or ignoring him! I'm not a shit friend. I went to the funeral to show my

support and so clearly I'm not an asshole but if you wanna talk about who's actually shutting out who then obviously it's *Ivan* because he's just pretending everything is fine and talking like normal to everyone and it's just so fucking sick!"

Alfred was breathing like he just ran a marathon and his voice sounded like it was splitting and his words were coming out in awkward bursts like he was struggling to put everything together but he still wasn't finished.

"And don't tell me I should tell him because either he doesn't react at all because apparently your friends and family dying is just a thing, it is what it is or fucking whatever but if he *does* react then everything he's been bottling up will come out and that'll be a shitshow because do you know how angry and feral he can get? He's a big fucking child and I don't think he can handle big emotions and you'd think this would be the biggest urgh- 'upset' he'd ever have in his lifetime so how the fuck am I supposed to help him? What, am I supposed to tell him I found her so he can blame me and take it all out on me?? I mean, that's an idea but I wouldn't know what to do after once his upsetness is gone? Well, fuck, it'll never be gone but I mean once there's nothing left to yell about. Because I know what it's like. It starts with wanting to make your fingers bleed by ripping apart everything you can touch but then after the energy is gone you're dead inside and out and thinking is too hard because you can only think about being upset and wanting revenge but you realise you can't get revenge because there's nothing you can do."

Alfred's breathing was calming and his voice was strained from yelling, breaking so the last part came out almost like a whisper that Matthew had to strain to hear.

"What if he blames himself because I'm pretty sure he was meant to be cleaning out that storage unit too... what if he gets so upset that he can only think about doing things... things that aren't helpful at all and he knows it but sometimes it's too tempting to ignore... maybe it would be best if he blamed me then. At least-"

Alfred finally stopped and Matthew couldn't hear him breathing anymore.

Well, he got the confrontation he wanted. He got a lot of information and more than enough insight into Alfred's thick head. He didn't know what to do with it. Some parts he didn't know what to make of it but his problem seemed mostly straightforward. He didn't want to tell Ivan because he was scared that it would somehow break his friend. Matthew didn't understand *how* exactly Ivan would become more upset if he learnt that Alfred was there but it was certainly more than he bargained for when he sought to kill someone for Alfred to find.

Only time would tell how this played out but in the meantime, Alfred's haggard breathing picked right back up and Matthew could tell he was sobbing. Matthew was apathetic to this and obligation said he should *try* to comfort Alfred but he knew he'd just get shut out again unless he pushed and pushed.

He was just content to know that Alfred *could* be pushed to open up and if Matthew truly wished he'd get what he wanted.

But... did that mean in the past... he didn't push hard enough? Before everything when he really wanted his brother to care about him... did he just not try hard enough?

He *detested* that idea. It sat inside him *wrong* and made him feel all sorts of wrath that demanded he take his anger out on someone.

"I'm sorry Alfred. You can eat in your room."

He left his brother alone. That's what Matthew would want if he was shut in and crying in his room. It was a kindness that Alfred wouldn't recognise because he was fundamentally different but it was all Matthew could really do when his stubborn brother wouldn't let him do anything else.

He needed to get Alfred off of his mind and he needed to carve himself a brand. Two birds and one switchblade.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is a bit... tricky for me so it might be a bit late. I want to make sure it's as good as possible and got the right tone/hits the right points

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It might've been a little too early for Matthew to be stalking the streets, but the restlessness inside of him demanded he get moving. Considering it was only just around dinner time, there were plenty of people about, wandering around in an unhurried but aware pace. Though their awareness was likely just street smarts - something much more common now than ever thanks to his work.

He walked through some side streets in one of the less-than-desirable areas. If it wasn't for his newfound confidence, he'd be worried about being mugged - or worse. But as fate would have it... he's the 'worse'. This new perspective of his would've worried him a year ago. It would've made him question his sanity and how he could even believe it. He had been nothing but spineless and would've rolled over for anyone.

Well, if that was true, it was all the more amusing that *he* was changing the behaviour of the city.

Not that he'd completely changed it yet... he'd only killed four people. More people died in weather events yet no one feared the wind. The kills he'd scored so far had just become so blown out of proportion and *visible* that *everyone* had an opinion on them and by extent, the Trail Killer.

He'd have to work hard to become the boogeyman of the city. But considering how easy, *how fun* it's been so far, he was sure he could bring the society that discounted and neglected him to its knees.

He couldn't wait to see if that was possible.

Maybe he was just upset - all because of Alfred, what's new? - but he felt the need to prove himself. Prove himself to who? He wasn't sure. Alfred? Who got upset because of the murders because he's weak?

But he didn't want to give Alfred all the credit. It wasn't his brother's sole fault that Matthew's life was so underwhelmingly shitty.

Was he trying to prove something to himself?

His thoughts weren't exactly concise, but that didn't matter. He didn't need to think about the *why*, only the *how* once he had a target in mind.

It wasn't long until he came across a target. A man was smoking by a dumpster around the corner of an alley. It wasn't hard to put two and two together when Matthew could make out his uniform being from the shop beside him. It seemed he had closed the shop, all alone. Matthew didn't recognise the man so the likelihood that this was one of Alfred's friends was *low*, low enough Matthew was willing to risk it. Matthew would have to bet that all of Alfred's friends, besides his brother, were having dinner together and off the streets for the time being.

Matthew paused to scope out the scene. No cameras, no witnesses, and an easy exit. How perfect. The only risk was the man, but Matthew knew he could take him off guard. After all, Matthew was

unassuming and unthreatening, all qualities that apparently made people decide not to bother with him.

He shoved his hand into his pocket and walked into the alley towards the man, who paid him no notice.

"Excuse me?" He said pleasantly to make the man look his way while keeping to the shadows.

"What?" The man blew some smoke out the corner of his mouth, thankfully the opposite way. But he didn't move from where he leaned on the wall.

"Do you have the time?" Matthew stalled.

"Don't you have a phone?" The man sighed but reached into his pocket with his free hand and lowered his smoke with the other.

Matthew opened the blade and lunged forward. The man sucked in a wet gasp and his phone clattered to the ground. Matthew kicked it into the alley, far out of reach. But the man wasn't thinking logically like Matthew was, instead seizing and trying to stop the heavy and sluggish blood from flowing from his neck with wide eyes.

His cigarette fell to the ground and Matthew wondered if the man even knew what had happened, his wide eyes staring ahead at nothing as his janky movements jolted to save himself but ultimately did nothing. All he did was collapse to the ground and breathe harshly.

Matthew leaned forward and swiftly carved the top two sides of a triangle onto the flinching man's forehead. The resulting wound looked like a pointer, resembling one found on the many trails throughout the park.

He took a tissue from his other pocket to wipe off the blade before pocketing both as he watched the focus fade from the man's eyes. Once he was certain the man wouldn't move again, he shrugged off his backpack and added a layer of clothing. It was a bit chilly anyway, considering he was only in a shirt and shorts. He pulled some pants on and a long sleeve over his slightly damp shirt. He didn't get that much blood on him, and he was content that he was 'levelling up' so to speak. After slicing so many necks he had finally gotten the hang of avoiding the mess.

But he still brought a few changes of clothes with him. Better to be safe than sorry. Even though he was convinced that even a suspicious degree of blood would go unnoticed just by the merit of being on *him*.

With the knife and backpack in place, he leisurely disappeared back into the alley, effectively blending into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be apart of the next chapter but I split it up so it wouldn't be so long. The next chapter will be a bit heavier so be warned.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Spain, but without the S

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three more targets later, Matthew couldn't feel more comfortable and confident. His backpack was much lighter now he was wearing more clothes. The stickiness between layers wasn't exactly comfortable, but it spurred him on in a sick sort of way that had him thinking 'What did it matter?' Some sick part of him enjoyed the aesthetic of being covered in blood as if it were a testament to how far he'd fallen.

He couldn't wait to see the aftermath of tonight. When the police realised that *this* series of killings was committed by the Trail Killer. It was *wrong* to find this so entertaining. But it wasn't like he had any other hobbies. This consumed his life and was all he lived for.

He wandered through the streets as he reflected on tonight's inspired streak. His mood had certainly recovered and he was endlessly entertained by churning over new thoughts related to what he had done. He wondered if any of his victims from tonight had been discovered. It was a possibility considering he didn't take any effort to lure them away to someplace secluded. But it shouldn't set off alarm bells immediately. So far, if he struck, it was once a night. They would be convinced that the body they found would be the *only* one. Until they found the others... maybe they'd be convinced it was the work of a copycat coincidentally striking on the same night... until they noticed that each corpse had the same signature marking implying that this was the work of only *one individual*...

He was sure the smile on his face was foul just thinking about the autopsies. He didn't bother hiding it, having put on a plain mask for that reason. It probably didn't hide amusement from his eyes, but no one really looked at him anyway.

He was on a roll tonight and he had no intention of stopping until he was satisfied.

He analysed his surroundings as he sauntered through the quiet streets, the only sound coming from a running river. It wasn't that late at night and a lot of businesses were only just closing. But this area wasn't known for its nightlife. Matthew was sure he would still find someone around anyway. Someone stupid enough to not have scurried home or maybe someone with nothing to go home to.

Finding someone was easy enough. When he couldn't see anyone he took the footbridge over the river and stalled when he saw a dark silhouette standing in the middle of it, leaning over the edge with their head hung low. Matthew almost shook his head at how easy this one would be. Just another tally to add to tonight's total. He glanced around and did his routine checks. No witnesses, no cameras... And, as an added bonus, the lights on the bridge were faulty. The only light working was at the end of the bridge, plunging the middle into darkness.

Where was the self-preservation? Didn't they know that there was a killer about? Though lurking in the darkness probably freaked out others who were more street smart.

Matthew shrugged it off. As long as there were people who thought they were invincible and went out at night, he could keep doing what he was doing. It was the only thing he really cared about anymore.

As Matthew approached he could see the person with more clarity. The man didn't seem to notice or didn't seem to feel the incoming threat. Instead, he threw his head back and Matthew could see he was drinking. How many victims were going to be drunks? The man finished his can before dropping it to the ground. He kicked the can beside a box, which turned out to be a case as he grabbed another and Matthew heard the telltale hiss of another can being opened.

The man must've been in his own world because he didn't notice when Matthew was standing right beside him.

"Are you okay?" Matthew asked politely, eagerly waiting to lunge. The man jolted to look at him, spilling his drink all down his chin and shirt with one clumsy movement. Matthew might've found it amusing... if he wasn't staring at a familiar face...

Fuck, this was one of Alfred's friends. What were the chances?

"Si, I'm fineee," Antonio chuckled and wiped the mess with his sleeve, sighing as he did. It didn't escape Matthew's notice of how slurred his words were. "This'sss embarrassing."

The chances were low. There was nearly one million people in the greater area and city combined and no matter how much of a social butterfly Alfred was, he couldn't possibly have *that* many friends.

"It's okay, eh? I'm not judging," Matthew said reassuringly.

"Awwww, thanks. You're suuuuuch a good person," Antonio said, "Why's there so many good persons...?"

Matthew noted that half of the box had been emptied and if the crushed cans surrounding it were anything to go by, they were all drunk at this spot. How long had Antonio been here?

"Aren't you a good person?"

At face value, he was simply keeping the conversation going but he had a feeling something was going on.

"Maybe?" Antonio shrugged and finished his drink. A logical and concerned part of Matthew wondered what the percentage was. But the apathetic and disconnected part knew it wasn't his problem. Even though he was on the fence about whether or not he'd kill Alfred's friend - If he chose to then it didn't matter how much Antonio drank.

Antonio laughed sharply before cutting himself off and staring down into the water.

"I'm not."

Then he shrugged like he didn't care, leaned forward and almost hit his head on the railing. Matthew cringed at the uncoordinated display and watched as Antonio took something out of the

case. Inside he could see a large bottle lying down but in the dark, he couldn't see much else, like if it was alcohol or if there was any liquid still in there. But considering it didn't have a cap...

Antonio pulled out a clear takeaway container and stumbled as he pushed it towards Matthew, who inched back at the other's approach.

"Here, take this," Antonio insisted as he tried to grab Matthew's arm.

"No, you keep it," Matthew physically evaded.

"Please take it. I don't want it to go to waste," Antonio's voice sounded strange as he tried to laugh.

"It's yours, save it for tomorrow."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I- uh my fridge is broken," Antonio stumbled over his words and held the box out. "Please, it will make me feel like I've done a good deed if I can feed a stranger."

"Fine," Matthew took the box to make him back off. "Thank you."

The box was warm and the inside of the lid had droplets clinging to it. He couldn't really tell what exactly it was in the low light, but he had a funny feeling it was pasta.

"I couldn't eat it," Antonio mumbled as he continued drinking. "It tasted wrong. There's nothing wrong with it! I'm ah... just picky."

Unknowing how to respond to that, Matthew just nodded and shoved the box into his backpack. Instead of reaching for his switchblade, he clasped his hands together and squeezed.

He didn't have any urge to kill Antonio. Sure, he wanted to kill as many as possible tonight, but he told himself it was for the best if he left Alfred's friends be... for now. Who knows how his brother would react when he was already upset and unstable.

But because he was drunk out of his mind, Antonio clearly had lost all of his sensibilities. And because Matthew was being honest with himself, he knew he just wanted to dig for information about his brother's friends.

"Thanks," Matthew, paranoid, refrained from leaning on the railing. "Were you not hungry...?"

"Yeah, sorry," Antonio chuckled too quickly. "Yeah, but I don't wanna bother a stranger about it."

Funny, Antonio gave him the impression that he didn't mind who he was talking to, he could just talk all the same. His personality was consistent and *never* had to be *altered* to appeal to anyone. He was genuine and that was enough. Everyone just liked him for who he was. Matthew never *disliked* him, Antonio was always just friendly to him. The only thing he had against Antonio was a distaste for how desperate the man must be to try and amuse Lovino, wasting his efforts on someone who never appreciated what he had. Matthew thought Antonio was an idiot.

"I already said I'm not judging. And I'm just a stranger to you, it might make you feel better and you won't have to see me ever again, eh?"

Never mind the fact Antonio might not even *remember* it.

"Yeah, that is veeeery true. But I'm not all here-" Antonio snapped his fingers in front of his own face "-so I should probably do what I know is right." His pleasant face slipped and his tone became sour and spiteful. "Like jump off this bridge."

Eh?!

Matthew's brow furrowed as he stared into Antonio's lazy and unfocused eyes. After a moment of thoughtful swaying, Antonio screwed his eyes shut tightly and smacked a hand over his face.

"Ah, that was a joke. I know it probably wasn't funny very - ah, *very funny*, but it's a joke with me, si? I get it. It doesn't mean anything." Antonio attempted to clarify with his eyes still shut. Why was he pretending he wasn't blackout drunk? "Dark humour. It'sssss not really landing well, is it? Ah, do you want a drink?"

"Yeah, I'll have a drink," As long as he didn't leave it around with his DNA on it, he should be fine. And accepting it kept the conversation going...

Antonio clumsily handed him a drink and Matthew was careful to take it. It spat as he opened the can and he pulled his mask down to take a sip. It was too dark to see the label on the drink, but he could predominately taste cola. He pulled the mask back up and analysed Antonio, who hadn't grabbed himself a drink and was now staring over the edge of the bridge.

"Thanks."

"Ah, of course," Antonio said distractedly.

"Are you alright?"

"If I have any more, I am going to throw up," Antonio was gripping the railing as he pressed right against it. Matthew was surprised that he hadn't thrown up already considering how much he'd drank... He was due to throw up soon.

"You should ah, take my drinks," Antonio said as he teetered forward and tried to laugh. It came out bitter. "I think I've had enough and I won't need them."

Antonio gave him the impression he'd give someone the clothes off of his back if he believed someone needed them more... Matthew understood, he used to do so much for everyone, desperately trying to keep their attention and make them like him. If people were happy with him and he kept them happy... He felt sick. He felt angry and sick and liquid spilled from the can as he clenched it and it ran down his arm-

But the days of bending over backwards for *nothing* were over. He used to blame himself but then he realised it was never his fault. He couldn't care less if people were unhappy with him. At least if they were unhappy with him then they noticed him instead of just dismissive and brushing past, and that was something he never wanted to experience again.

But something was still bothering him. Antonio was only being held up by the railing at this point and with each passing moment it became evident that Matthew had something in common with him. Because with each passing moment, what Matthew recognised to be a facade, was slowly and surely slipping out of Antonio's grasp.

It was impressive Antonio was able to keep it up for so long despite being so drunk, but maybe it was just desperation. Or he didn't know who else he'd be without it.

Maybe Matthew did understand why Antonio sucked up to Lovino so much because Matthew did the same damn thing to everyone else.

He felt sorry for Antonio, but feelings of confusion and bitter dismissal arose. Why the hell did Antonio need a facade?

He made it clear that he had no interest in burdening a stranger... but... Matthew figured it'd be worth a shot as he stuffed his mask in his pocket. At the very least, it would be easier to manipulate and guilt an answer.

"Antonio, what's going on?" Matthew stepped closer and Antonio's face morphed into recognition.

"Alfred you-" his face broke. "Thank God you're okay. You weren't at the restaurant? Why-? *Mierda, what are you doing **here***."

Antonio gripped the railing and looked down, his head swivelling between his apparent friend and the river below.

"Why are you here?" He asked so desperately it took Matthew off guard.

"I- I was just taking a walk. To get my mind off things, eh? Because-"

Antonio moved quickly as he stuck his head over the railing and began retching. As he caught his breath he steadily brought himself up and didn't bother wiping his mouth as he fixed Matthew with a stare. Matthew fought through the intensity to not break eye contact or stumble over words to explain himself like he would've done once upon a time. Alfred never did that and he never *had* to.

Finally, Antonio sighed with what seemed to be relief and the tension in his body drained, his posture slumping as he leaned on the railing.

"Thank God, I worried the worst... stupidly, I see. You come uh, have come at a good time, you know that? You know what it feels like so I probably don't need to explain but I really want to anyway. I can't stop *spiralling*, amigo. It's times like these... I don't feel as strong as I should be."

Antonio rubbed his sleeve aggressively against his face but didn't stop talking, his words becoming muffled.

"I feel disgusting," Antonio said with an air of amusement that didn't match the words, then looked sadly at 'Alfred'. "You do a good job at pretending to be strong but... you wouldn't jump, would you? Even if you really, really wanted to...?"

Matthew was careful to not let his disbelief show on his face. Of course Alfred wouldn't jump! He was stubborn and believed that his influence held much more weight than it really did so if he had a problem he'd try to solve it instead of getting caught up and running from it. All of that was evident in his pointless attempts at becoming a vigilante.

But Matthew still wondered if this was a part of what he was missing. Why would Antonio ask that? Sure, Matthew knew Alfred had been sad and distressed ever since Arthur died and with each new death he started to react worse and worse, but Alfred wouldn't jump from a bridge-!

Did Antonio only ask that because Matthew was standing here, as 'Alfred', and the thought just happened to cross his mind?

Even if Alfred had those thoughts or feelings - which Matthew doubted because his brother was toxically optimistic - he was certain Alfred wouldn't even entertain them. His brother was stubborn and he wouldn't die before making the Trail Killer *pay*. Matthew knew that his brother would sooner risk becoming a victim of the Trail Killer than becoming a suicide statistic. He'd rather go out, doing something because he believed in because from the youngest age Alfred had always delusionally believed that his presence was great and he could make a difference.

But how should Matthew answer? With Antonio's question, everything fell into place and he knew why Antonio was here and asking that.

A nagging urgency told Matthew to be careful.

"I don't know..." Matthew replied slowly. "I don't think I would."

"Yeahhh, I cannot picture *you* actually going through with it. You just think about it and hate yourself for it... can I tell you the truth? Well, I know we promised each other to tell the truth so I guess there's no point in *asking* but... I'm ashamed to say it. Alfred... I was going to do it," Antonio chuckled without a smile, "Thinking about it isn't enough and every day I wake up I can't take it anymore. I just can't stay here and keep *living* how I am."

Matthew really didn't know what to say. His old self would be saying anything that could come out of his mouth in a desperate attempt to say *something* right and *fix this*.

"But now I can't do it... not when you've seen me now. I don't want to hurt you too and drag you down with me."

Matthew thought about asking why he wanted to do it, knowing even though 'Alfred' would already know Antonio was too drunk to realise that, he could already figure out why. He didn't know how Antonio felt about Arthur. But he did know how he felt about Francis and Lovino. Matthew knew that Francis was Antonio's 'brother from another mother'. He also knew about Antonio's excessive obsession with Lovino... and how Antonio had left early the night Lovino was killed.

But if he also had to make an educated guess... Matthew was sure that Antonio was suffering for longer than that.

"It hurts to live but I can't stop thinking about how I'll be passing on that hurt if I- drinking did nothing to stop it. Now I think I should stay alive and suffer for what I did to Lovino. He was there for me but then I left him and I- How could I call Gilbert my brother if I left him behind and made him suffer like I was? But then I tell myself he'd be fine because he's stubborn and strong and I wish I could be like him but I can't stop being *me*, I don't want to be *me* and I just... it's all I can think about. Does that make sense?"

Antonio laughed humorlessly.

"And a little voice in my head says that everyone else can handle it, it's just me that can't. Because I couldn't handle it I killed Lovino. I feel so guilty, it's all my fault. Then I feel guilty for how I can't just get myself together. And Francis too... he was my brother, he was always there for me and cheered me up when I couldn't be cheerful myself. And I wasn't there for him."

Matthew could tell Antonio's thoughts were scrambled as he blurted out seemingly unconnected statements, each an ongoing thought or conversation that Matthew wasn't privy to.

"Alfred, I know we made a pact to reject these feelings but... this bridge... *Mierda*, I'm a coward. It's all I want but if you can keep this up then surely I could? I've kept it up my whole life. I'm sure that when I wake up tomorrow it won't be so *bad* and I'll just put on a smile and make sure I don't burden anyone but myself with my inability to cope... because I'll be *fine*. I've always been ***fine***."

Antonio chuckled but Matthew could see his eyes were tearing up.

"No, I can't keep doing that. Even though I know suicide is bad and I wouldn't want everyone to *know* that I... I did something bad because I am bad... when I'm not here to defend myself, but... I think it would be worth it. I've weighed it up and this is what I really want. But I'm such a coward! Just thinking about it- even if I'm dead I still can't- I wish I could make it look like an accident because then... no one could blame me for it, right? No one could hate me and if it wasn't *my* fault that I died then maybe everyone would remember me fondly instead of just being the *filler person* that was just there to be happy and when the slightest amount of stress was piled onto his shoulders he couldn't even do that."

Filler person, eh?

Merde... Matthew couldn't...

Matthew sighed as he thought about how relateable Antonio's obligations were, how he recognised the stress that ate away until no flesh remained. Before, Matthew was just like that and he knew how tiring and disheartening it was. He knew that the facade and feelings of inadequacy never ended, because even after becoming the Trail Killer Matthew could see he was still a slave to obligation and wearing a mask. He was freed in his mind but he didn't know if Antonio could ever do the same. Not when he was being swallowed up.

Matthew was confronted with a strange feeling... he *wanted* to help Antonio. And not because he felt like he *needed* to or had to. The feeling caught him off guard and shame quickly followed because he thought he'd put that all behind him and he wouldn't let himself be *used* again... but this time it was coming from genuine pity. He knew how Antonio was suffering.

At the very least Matthew wasn't in a place to kill Antonio, which he thought said enough. Why wouldn't he take the opportunity when it presented itself? Not because he's one of Alfred's friends but because he was *right there*-

He couldn't *unkill* Antonio but *not* acting made him feel weak, like his resolve was slipping and he was reverting. So he reasoned that he'd get another opportunity. But now he felt worse for having the moment of weakness altogether. He could prove himself by killing others but if he was hesitant when it came to Alfred's friends... did that make him weak?

He reacted too late when Antonio stumbled with a sudden urgency and crashed into Matthew, hugging him tight and making him drop the drink.

"I'm so sorry Alfred. I'm sorry to always be dumping everything on you, it's really not fair. I promise I won't jump. I know you'd do everything you could to stop me if I tried... But you're such a good friend for always being here and listening."

Matthew was stiff as Antonio clung to him and the only thing he could think was, *merde*, he can't kill Antonio now. The choice was made for him.

"Now I just feel really really guilty because I haven't been here for you... I know that everything's been getting to you too and I'm worried that you'll be next! What if you're next because I wasn't here for you! Please promise you won't go out at night anymore amigo, because if you get killed too- I-"

Still, despite his issues Antonio was worrying about other people.

"I'm sorry for always making you worry, I wish people didn't have to worry about me. I wish Lovino didn't worry... I'm only here to be happy and I can't even do that- but there's no way I could put you through losing another friend-"

There wasn't anything Matthew could do for Antonio besides hug him back and pat his head as he cried, acting unlike Matthew's ever seen before as he supported Antonio's full drunken weight. Matthew couldn't work out if it was out of obligation or not, but he doubted it would *actually* help. Maybe Antonio was beyond help. Matthew had never been pushed *that* far - or at least not in *that direction*, but he couldn't imagine how he would come back from feeling that way.

He definitely pitied Antonio. He could see how much the facade was destroying him and he'd never be able to break free. Antonio was irreversibly and inherently fucked up, just like Matthew was. But he couldn't do anything to help... at least not in a conventional way.

Should Matthew kill him? Part of him wanted to kill Antonio to prove he wasn't *weak* because he didn't want to, and another part screamed that it would be a *kindness* and a mercy. Maybe if Antonio stopped denying that his problems were overwhelming him he could've gone to the right person for help... he wouldn't have to continue to be a slave for a facade. But Matthew knew that Antonio didn't see help as an option or even a possibility. He was just stuck that way.

If only Antonio didn't touch him, Matthew could've just killed him and he wouldn't be in pain anymore.

But... maybe Matthew could kill him without taking out the knife? What if he encouraged Antonio to go through with it and take the plunge. The result would be the same; Antonio would still be dead.

That left Matthew with an odd question. That kill wouldn't go towards the Trail Killer and he had to think about whether or not he liked that idea. Did he find it pointless to kill if it wasn't going towards something? The Trail Killer was now his legacy but... that wasn't why he started. He did it for the sake of the act. For some sick sport that he couldn't justify. Initially, he did it just because he could. He did like what he was doing, but the serial killer status made it so much more interesting. It made him feel like someone.

He didn't know why analysing his motive was so conflicting, especially when somewhere in his heart he'd already gone home for the night. He wasn't going to kill Antonio.

"How do I stop being like this?" Antonio agonised as he dug into Matthew's clothes, causing a flash of fear that Antonio was getting evidence on him. Matthew needed to take control of this.

"I don't know," he replied as he tried to escape Antoino's hold. "Where do you live? I'm going to take you home."

Antonio gave him a sheepishly drunk look as his eyes squinted around their surroundings.

"I have no idea."

Matthew didn't know what he expected. But his mind quickly came up with another solution. He almost dismissed it... but he knew how to make it work. Plus it *just* might help Antonio, considering Matthew couldn't.

Conveniently, it took little convincing for Antonio to follow him after cleaning up the scene. Matthew helped keep Antonio steady as they traveled and the drunkard was surprisingly cooperative, though it was likely all guilt - stronger than any drink.

Matthew had everything he needed to do at the forefront of his mind as they arrived home at nearly 1 in the morning.

"You need to be quiet," Matthew insisted, making sure Antonio understood as he dumped the box of empty drinks outside, planting the evidence. "My brother's sleeping so be quiet."

"Ahh, who?" Antonio squinted as Matthew pushed him through the front door but left it wide open. He needed to make it look like Antonio stumbled in here all by himself.

Matthew shook his head at Antonio's question and sat him down on the couch. His first priority was dealing with any evidence. He couldn't risk loose ends. He struggled to get Antonio out of his outer layer of clothing, leaving him in only his boxers and shirt as he flopped down onto the couch and groaned at the ceiling.

Matthew rolled him onto his side so he wouldn't choke and die if he threw up. Strangely, everything Matthew was doing was hardly felt an obligation. Maybe it was because he wasn't actually performing in the hopes of being liked because he had already given up on winning anyone's affections.

Matthew took Antonio's clothes and as he stood- Antonio was pleading for him not to leave. Surprise surprise, out of worry for 'Alfred'. It hardly felt like a burden to promise he would come back.

As he dumped Antonio's clothes in the washing machine he realised there was something in the pocket of the other man's jacket - a note folded in a tied-up small plastic bag. He was almost hesitant to open the note but considering Antonio explicitly told him his intentions, reading them should be no different. But he didn't have time for it now so he put it in his backpack, which reminded him about the now cold pasta. He stopped to put that with the case of empty drinks before dumping his backpack into his room and changing his clothes. He put his contaminated clothes into the washing machine and started it. He reminded himself to take Antonio's clothes out after and dump them near him but until then he had some more pieces to put in place.

He filled up a cup of water and put it on the table beside Antonio, leaving the cupboard open to make it look like Antonio helped himself. The only thing he couldn't explain was how Antonio would've found the bucket that Matthew put under him, but Matthew would rather not be cleaning up vomit. No doubt Antonio would have some blank spots in his memory that he could creatively fill.

Matthew found it amusing to picture what Alfred's face would look like tomorrow when he discovered their guest.

Antonio was still awake, but Matthew could tell he was out of it from his squinting eyes, like if he opened them fully he'd throw up again.

"Alf-migo, you really are such a good person. I'm so sorry you have to put up with me."

Matthew thought about how Alfred would respond, but dialled down the intensity that would surely have Alfred grab Antonio and scream. But he had to respond quietly because the *real* Alfred was sleeping in the other room.

"It's really not a problem. I love all my friends! If you ever need me, I'm there."

"I'm worried about you... What you told me- I'm so sorry to make everything all about myself. I know you're just like me. I'm such a bad person."

"Worry about yourself," Matthew suggested, slightly amazed at how desperately Antonio was ignoring his own problems. "You're suffering more than I am."

Antonio made an unintelligent noise like he was going to throw up and Matthew took it as his opportunity to go.

"It's late eh? Just... go to sleep. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight."

Antonio said something in reply but it was half-slurred and ended with Matthew thanking his foresight to grab the bucket, cringing at how loud the sound was. He didn't want to encourage any more back and forth so he quickly went off to have his shower and wash his hands clean of tonight.

Chapter End Notes

I had like 4 different ways to end this and I finally settled on this one. The others were alternative outcomes and a bit darker

Chapter 12

When Matthew woke up, he didn't immediately remember the guest he dumped on the couch last night. When he did, a flush of urgency at his spontaneous actions got him out of bed. It was only around breakfast time when he cracked his door open and thankfully, he couldn't hear anyone else up.

He sighed. Of course Alfred would be sleeping in. Matthew was hoping his brother would wake up earlier and notice the scene Matthew had set while Matthew was still in bed and therefore *seemed* to have no way of knowing about it. He supposed he could always pretend he found it like this.

Plus he'd get to see Alfred's reaction instead of just *hearing* it.

He checked on Antonio, who was completely out of it on the couch, but otherwise, still alive and still ok. His jacket and pants were comedically tossed onto the ground beside the bucket and it really looked like he just stripped in someone else's house before passing out.

Matthew took the opportunity to dispose of the bucket's contents and put it back where it belonged before approaching Alfred's door. After a moment of composing his facade, he quietly knocked.

"Alfred," he whispered and went to open the door only to find it locked.

Right... he forgot that he... -kinda?- fought with Alfred last night. Alfred must've locked himself in his room. Matthew didn't know why that stung a little, but he kept knocking.

"Alfred," he mumbled, trying his best to only stir Alfred and not Antonio. Matthew really didn't want to navigate an interaction with Antonio while he was 'Matthew' during the day, in his own home, and where *Alfred* was only a room away.

Matthew kept knocking but Alfred didn't respond. Matthew didn't let his irritation show at his brother's intense sleeping habits. Instead, he found his phone and called his brother. With his ear against Alfred's door, he heard his brother's ringtone followed by groaning and the call being rejected.

Did... Alfred blindly hang up? ...Or was it because he saw who was calling?

Matthew pushed his paranoid thoughts aside because Alfred was up now and knocked again.

"Whaaaaat?" The word was strung out into a groan.

"Someone broke in last night," Matthew said, knowing the misleading words would get exactly what he needed from his brother.

"*What?!*"

There was a thump and Matthew could hear his brother scrambling to get to the door. He stepped back just in time for Alfred to slam his door open.

"What?! What happened?" Alfred said, looking very much like he'd just been interrupted from hibernation.

"I don't know! I just got up and someone's on the couch-"

He cut himself off when Alfred brushed past to investigate. Matthew hung back, watching and waiting for if his input was necessary. But he was mostly just making sure everything fell into place.

Alfred's frantic anxiety faded when he recognised the 'intruder'.

"Oh shit- Don't worry, he's my friend. Definitely not the Trail Killer," Alfred scowled at that name. "Um, I don't know what he's doing here but don't worry I'll grill him when he wakes up."

Matthew would love to be a fly on the wall when Antonio woke up. Once Alfred realised Antonio came here drunk, he wouldn't trust anything Antonio said, like claiming to be brought here by Alfred himself.

"Fuck, what are you doing here?" Alfred mumbled, mostly to himself as he investigated the scene. Matthew walked over to the front door and grabbed the case of drinks sitting just outside.

"Eh, this was just sitting here... is this yours?"

Alfred ran over to check it out.

"No! Holy shit, did he drink all of that?" Alfred grabbed the pasta from the case, which had probably gone bad from being out all night. "Fuck, he drank *all of that* after going out for dinner? What the fuck? When- Wait-"

Matthew followed Alfred back inside as he put the case on the coffee table and paced, seeming more and more tense with every second. Had Alfred figured it just what Antonio was thinking last night?

"Why would he break in here? Was it because you didn't go out last night?" Matthew prodded.

"Maybe..." Alfred ran his hands through his hair, guilt evident. "Yeah, maybe. He was probably worried. I really should've told someone that I wasn't going. I really should've just lied and said that I was sick but at least then they'd believe it and wouldn't think it's weird when I didn't show up. I don't know."

"But why would he drink so much?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't say he's an *alcoholic*, but he drank when Francis... y'know. And then when Lovino-" Alfred cringed and gave Antonio a look of pity and understanding before completely flipping out. "-Fuck, does that mean someone else died?"

"Alfred?" Matthew questioned as his brother bolted to his room.

"What if he's drinking because someone else died," Alfred repeated as he frantically typed on his phone. Matthew approached and glanced over to see his brother sending a message to nearly every one of his contacts.

"Alfred... I think that's..." Matthew couldn't find a way to word it that wouldn't be too on the nose but also guide his brother to stop freaking out, "it's probably not helpful."

Alfred just ignored him and Matthew's face fell flat.

"Maybe nobody died, maybe he was just drinking because people have already died."

"Mattie, you never know. What kind of friend would I be if I wasn't checking in." Alfred said abruptly. "Look, I just need to know if everyone's alright, alright? I just can't-"

Alfred took a deep breath in as he sent the last text before pocketing his phone.

"How about we get breakfast?" Alfred changed the subject in a tone that suggested he wouldn't be swayed. "Can you make pancakes? I bet Antonio would love something to eat."

"Who?" Matthew said, keeping the spite from his voice.

"Anto- the guy on the couch?" Alfred helpfully pointed. "Uh, I guess you wouldn't know him but could you please set aside some pancakes for him?"

"Sure," Matthew said and grabbed out some pre-mix. His brother loitered nearby, but Matthew saw his focus was on his phone, zoning in every time he got a notification.

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They ate breakfast in silence. Matthew could tell his brother was distracted by his phone and in thought. Breakfast was the perfect opportunity to *talk*, about what who knew, but it was an *opportunity*. Matthew didn't take it.

He just stood there. Eyes drifting between between his brother hunched over his plate as he picked at his breakfast, and Antonio.

Maybe he needed some more sleep. He was so eager to have things progress he couldn't even enjoy his pancakes.

Luckily he didn't have to wait long. Matthew had collected his and his brother's plates when a groan on the sofa caught the twin's attention.

All Antonio did was roll over, which hardly constituted as 'awake', but he'd captured both brother's full attention.

Matthew pretended to be distracted by the dishes as Alfred bolted over, though Matthew's act of distraction was really unnecessary when Alfred had already forgotten he was there.

"Antony, dude," Alfred at least had the decency to lower his tone to a whisper. Though it was an Alfred whisper, so it wasn't exactly an actual whisper.

Alfred kept shaking Antonio and Matthew cringed as he thought about needing to get the bucket out again. He supposed it was better he remind Alfred that he was there by bringing it than staying back and allowing Antonio to make a mess in the living room.

"Here-"

Alfred jolted when Matthew passed him the bucket.

"Oh shit- Good thinking bro," Alfred 'whispered' before going back to poking the vomit bear. "Antonio, I know you're awake."

It was hard to believe Antonio was much of anything apart from a blob of jelly on the sofa but Alfred's must've got to him because his hands weakly rubbed at his face and *something* came out of his mouth.

It wasn't vomit, thankfully, but it wasn't a coherent sentence either. Matthew wanted to give Antonio the grace of assuming it was another language, but he knew it wasn't.

"I kinda need to know how much you drank so I know if you're dying or not," Alfred continued. "I mean, I guess you're not dead now which is so fucking great but I'm kinda worried that your liver or something is currently rotting inside out."

Antonio's eyes were squinting open lethargically, but it was too bright. Matthew knew that. He was surprised that Alfred *didn't*, considering his brother had more... life experiences than Matthew.

Matthew shut the blinds and curtains to ensure it was as dark as possible. Alfred was still focused on Antonio.

"And I'm also *really* curious about why you're here? Cus you're welcome whenever but why in the middle of the night? Is it because I wasn't at the dinner thing? I really hope not. I feel bad for ditching but I don't think you need to come crash without even telling me because of it. Is it really that bad I didn't go? I know I don't really stand up the group much but it's not really something to worry about, right? I guess if *you* ditched without saying anything then yeah, I'd be worried- I get it now. Yeah... I should've said something... I'm sorry."

"Give him the water and get painkillers or something," Matthew urged because Alfred really was oblivious to how horrible Antonio would be feeling. Their guest was just lying there as rigid as possible, as if even moving would cause too much pain.

"Oh shit, yep."

It took a while for Antonio to come good after a night like last night. Matthew didn't have anything to do besides lean against the wall opposite and watch as Alfred tried his best to make Antonio seem human again. At least he wasn't sick, so Antonio probably didn't feel that bad. At least not physically.

He didn't know how Antonio hadn't spotted him, staring at him like a hawk from the other side of the room. But with the context of last night and *knowing* that Alfred had at least been *told* that Antonio felt like shit, he thought his brother should at least be able to tell that right now; Antonio felt like shit.

Matthew thought it was very obvious. But he supposed he was used to having nothing to do besides observe.

He could tell that Antonio remembered last night.

At least Antonio was cooperating but Alfred wasn't really reading into it.

They had yet to really breach the subject of any topic at all, Alfred was more concerned with doing his friendship duties. At best everything said between them was 'small talk', just passing lines about Antonio's current *physical* health.

Antonio looked guilty but like he was just waiting for *it* to be brought up. Matthew could only hope his brother would handle it properly.

Because if Matthew couldn't be helped... he at least hoped someone as loved as Antonio stood a chance.

When Alfred had decided Antonio was alive enough and *not* at risk of dying because of a sick hangover, he let out a sigh of relief and slumped onto the sofa next to Antonio, who was carefully positioned upright.

Antonio was clearly fighting his nerves but still felt obliged to confront the issue.

"Alfred," his voice was rough, even after drinking the entire glass. Antonio cleared his throat and tried again, "...about last night-"

"It's kinda my fault, right? I always said that you could come visit whenever and I didn't *not* say in the middle of the night, so that's on me."

Alfred said it as a joke. But even as a joke, it made no sense to Antonio.

"Alfred you... you were there," Antonio said, as a reminder, like he didn't want to actually recount it and move on to what came next.

"You saw me?" Alfred went serious. "What- why didn't you text?! I know I was ignoring everyone's calls and texts but I can see texts while still ignoring them!"

Antonio made a face of confusion as he tried to make sense of the mismatched information through the haziness of a hangover.

"Fuck, does that mean that everyone calling thought...? Actually, I don't know what they were thinking. Fuck, I really am an asshole. I should've just sat through dinner and sucked it up instead of making a scene. Who else saw me?"

"Alfred... what?" Antonio squinted his eyes and Matthew had to wonder if the painkillers were enough.

"You just said you saw me at dinner? Who else saw me? Did I make everyone worried? Does that mean everyone was talking about me the whole time or-?"

"You weren't at dinner... you didn't show up?"

"You just said you saw me?" Alfred's tone was getting pushy, likely without his knowledge. "When did you see me then? Ugh, start from the start, you went to dinner, didn't you? Why'd you drink so much last night and then break in here?!"

Antonio seemed to be having trouble digesting everything Alfred said, either because of the hangover or Alfred not immediately talking about what he assumed was the most important thing of last night, Matthew didn't know.

All Matthew knew was that he was very surprised when Antonio's eyes fell on his. Antonio seemed equally surprised.

Antonio went to say 'who', Matthew could tell by the shape of his mouth before Antonio surprised him and mouthed 'oh'.

"Right, Alfred's brother-"

Alfred was confused by the switch in topics and seemed equally surprised to see Matthew there, standing in his own home.

"It's... I know it starts with an M," Antonio tried to laugh, politely- Matthew assumed as he thought hard to remember. "It's Matthew right?"

"Yeah," Matthew felt like he'd been caught off guard. He didn't actually expect Antonio to *know*.

"I really hope I didn't wake you up coming in last night. I'm so sorry if I did."

"It's alright, you didn't. I didn't hear anything or know that something happened until I woke up."

"Good, good," Antonio had a smile on his face but his eyes were worried. Probably because he knew he would have to recount everything to Alfred because Alfred just wasn't remembering what happened last night.

"Yeah, at least you came in quietly," Alfred chuckled positively, "I didn't hear anything either. Which is kinda scary because 'what if you were an evil fucked up serial killer?' so thank fuck you weren't. "

"Alfred, you were there last night," Antonio sounded pained and Alfred looked frustrated because he just wasn't understanding.

"Where was I?"

It came out a bit accusational and Alfred backtracked.

"Look, I'll tell you my deal and you tell me yours. I'll even tell you the truth because I feel really bad. Alright? I was going to go to dinner, I got to the restaurant but I chickened out because I saw Ivan there and I'm a coward, alright? And I just wasn't thinking because I went home and moped in my room and then when I woke up you were here. Last I saw you, you were at the restaurant and you were fine and happy and laughing about some shit with Gilbert, so what happened? ...Did something happen...?"

The last part was said with a cautionary weight, like Alfred was brushing at a sensitive subject. *The subject*.

The subject that was very relevant last night and 'Alfred' should *absolutely* know about.

Antonio was no doubt questioning his sanity.

"Alfred... you were *there*," Antonio said desperately, *pleadingly*. He looked pained as if the hangover was preventing him from being more articulate.

Alfred just shook his head, quick and hard in disbelief. Antonio opened his mouth, desperately about to deny when Alfred kept talking.

"Something happened, didn't it?" His voice was strained, "Was it *that* thing? Are- Are you trying to hint at it, you have to be, right, oh shit-"

Alfred's eyes flickered around uncertainly, uncomfortably, and when his eyes kept landing on Matthew the Canadian knew what was going to happen. He was going to get kicked out because Alfred didn't *know* that Matthew knew what his friend's sensitive secret was.

"I'll just go to my room, eh?" Matthew quickly offered and started walking before he could be sent out.

"Thank you, I'd offer to take this conversation elsewhere but I don't think I can move," Antonio laughed shamefully. Confirming he didn't want Matthew to hear the sensitive stuff he was about to spill despite Matthew being able to make an educated guess as to why.

"Yeah thanks bro, I'll talk to you later once I figure out what's going on," Alfred added.

Matthew just nodded as he turned the corner to his room and shut the door... but didn't turn the latch. He waited a moment before silently pulling it open enough to hear what was being said.

"Okay, so, give it to me straight. Were you feeling like... *doing* something last night?"

"Alfred, you were *there*-"

"Yeah you keep saying that but I don't know what the fuck you mean by that! What do you mean 'you were there'? I don't even know where 'there' was! Where were *you?*! Are you sure you aren't just making shit up- not cus you're a liar but because you were so fucking drunk? Seriously, I saw how much you had and if you had it *all* after dinner and *didn't* even eat your fucking dinner so you were drinking on empty- were you *trying* to *kill* yourself?!"

There was silence.

"Sorry, I'll try not to be so loud, you look like you're about to die but I'm just really worried, alright?"

More silence.

"Were you thinking about dying again?"

There was silence, and then Alfred took a sharp intake of breath-

"Shit, okay, no wonder you came here then. I'm glad you did, really."

"I'm so sorry... I think I told you but, don't you remember?" Came Antonio's vulnerable voice.

"Remember what? Last time I spoke to you was probably a week ago?"

"Alfred, *you* were there."

Antonio's voice hurt with frustration, desperation, confusion and pleading.

"Antonio..." Alfred sighed. "Do you mean last night? Just- tell me everything that happened because I *definitely* wasn't there. I was in my bed moping and you really should've called me like

you usually do if you get... overwhelmed? And don't even start on you feeling like you're wasting my time or making me hate you. Wouldn't you prefer calling instead of breaking and entering?"

The last part was said as a joke.

"It was your idea- you brought me here! Alfred, last night, you were with me and you brought me here-!"

"Okay, fine, I brought you here! Now just tell me everything that happened so I can work out what's going on and then we can work out what's happening together?"

"Okay, okay," Antonio's voice sounded pathetic. "I felt like... I felt really bad after the dinner. No, I felt terrible before then but when I everyone and they all looked so... happy, like nothing was wrong, I knew that I was broken and couldn't be fixed so I decided- I bought the drinks after dinner and I thought maybe they would help."

"So are you saying I was there with you then?"

"No, not until later- Alfred, are you certain you didn't leave your room at all-?"

"No I promise I didn't and I definitely don't sleepwalk. Are you sure you didn't just imagine me because seriously, dude, have you seen how much you drank last night?"

"I... I- Maybe. I guess I don't remember everything," Antonio said with an awkward laugh. "But I remember you."

"Okay, keep going then, I wanna know where I come into all of this."

"Alfred... I-"

Antonio cut himself off and the living room was silent.

"I need to warn you- you're going to be upset and I'm so sorry, I thought I told you last night- I guess I imagined it and you took it well and maybe you won't take it well now but it really shouldn't be a surprise because you know how I feel but still- I'm really sorry amigo, I knew how bad you'd feel-"

"You can tell me anything," Alfred said urgently, "Don't worry about how I'm going to feel about it if you *have* to say it. Which you do because seriously, you're worrying me by *not* telling me."

Antonio made some sort of choked noise which could've been from either his emotions or hangover. He spoke a moment later, so quietly Matthew could hardly hear it but he knew it took all his courage to admit-

"I was going to kill myself."

Alfred sucked in a breath of air-

"I'm so sorry-" Antonio got cut off.

"Well thank *fuck* you didn't," Alfred declared. "So you got alcohol and you were going to- *Oh My God*-"

Alfred sounded very upset as he kept talking.

"So you drank all that alcohol because you- you- y'know, and then you changed your mind and came here? Did you change your mind because you thought you saw me? Or you thought I told you to come here? Holy shit- Just, just keep talking about what happened after dinner, alright? Did anyone else know what you were going to do?"

"No, I could never tell them," Antonio said with conviction. "I just said goodbye and goodnight and then I bought alcohol and I found a bridge... I was going to drink everything before I jumped. To tell you the truth, I felt really scared. And really bad for how everyone else would feel. I kept telling myself once I was dead I wouldn't care and *caring* wouldn't hurt anymore but I knew I was still going to do it. But then you showed up... I remember we talked and I told you everything. We *hugged*. I touched you, so you had to be real, right?"

"I don't know, that sounds really creepy," Alfred chuckled anxiously. "Are you sure it wasn't just a stranger or something?"

"I know it was you," Antonio sounded certain. "He had your face and he knew who I was. I could tell."

There was silence.

"I wanna tell you off for being outside at night because what if the Trail Killer got you next but I guess you didn't really care then."

"I didn't want to be *murdered*. I just wanted to die. I- just couldn't *stay* here. Keep being *me*, it- you know how I feel. It got a bit too much and I just couldn't tough it out any longer."

"Dude, I'm not saying this because you *can't* talk to me anymore, please please keep talking to me when you get bad but you really need *actual* help, especially since you were *actually* gonna do it."

"Do you think it was an angel?"

"Huh? Dude, don't change the topic, I really need you to get help or I'm gonna put a tracking device on you."

"Alfred, I was raised Catholic. I remember being told that sometimes angels walk among us and we'd never know if we come face to face with them. I really need an explanation and if it wasn't you, then I can only think that I was *saved* last night."

Alfred paused before respectfully responding.

"If I couldn't be there for you then I'm glad that... *somehow*, you weren't alone. And that you were *saved*. I don't wanna make you feel guilty, but if you died... I wouldn't have coped. Especially since I could've stopped you, y'know. And I wouldn't have been the only one. I don't want you to feel guilty, you're not *wrong* for feeling this way, but imagine Gilbert."

Alfred stopped talking because did he really need to say any more? Matthew couldn't see him, but he knew Antonio was upset and regretful enough.

"I know," Antonio whispered. "It wasn't that I wasn't thinking... I-"

He sighed, sounding completely resigned and broken.

"I don't know how to be anything else and I *want* to just suck it up but... *I can't*."

Alfred sighed deeply.

"Look, how about we just take some baby steps to try and, I don't know, protect you so when next time happens things might go different? How would you feel about moving in with someone?"

Antonio went to make noises of disapproval and Matthew could already imagine the excuses of feeling like a burden that bummed everyone out.

"Uh, nuh uh, it's happening. You could move in here but we don't have a spare room. I guess you could just share my room. It's a bit messy but I would definitely clean it up for you. And then when you're sharing a house with someone it'd be like a fun sleepover and you wouldn't have to feel lonely and then when you feel *really* bad we can work through it together!"

Antonio hesitated.

"What about Matthew?"

"I'd just run it past him but I'm sure he'd be fine with it," Alfred said nonchalantly.

Matthew wasn't against Antonio living with someone. Objectively it was a good idea. But he really didn't want Antonio to live in the same house as him. It was a risk and he didn't want to feel even worse in his own home because he'd be reminded every day that Antonio and Alfred had something he just didn't. He'd watch his brother unconditionally support someone else and never glance his way...

He was already rehearsing excuses in his mind for when Alfred would 'run the idea past him', and Matthew would *ensure* his brother would. He could already see Alfred forgetting to tell Matthew about Antonio moving in until Antonio is literally living out of Alfred's room. Matthew would just have to corner Alfred once he and Antonio were done chatting to make Alfred confess.

"But then you'd have to *care* for me all the time," Antonio muttered, "and you have your own problems and-"

"Okay, fine," Alfred said, suspiciously smugly. "But you will be moving into *someone's* house. I'm just an option. Here's another option. How about *Gilbert*?"

Suddenly Antonio was stuttering.

"I know he doesn't know as much as I know because of some stupid reaons," Alfred said, "but he's your *best friend* and he probably isn't coping too well since Francis so maybe the both of you should just not cope well together!"

"What about *his brother*-" Antonio was quick to bring up.

"Oh, Ludwig? The trained police officer who probably has some useful mental health-y training? Yeah, he's like an added bonus! I know you and him are chill so why the hell would he care if you move in?"

"They don't have a spare room-"

"I know that you and Gilbert and Francis used to share a bed all the time so seriously, why would that change now? And, think about it this way! You won't have to pay so much rent anymore so that stress is gone! And that means that Gilbert would get to pay less rent if you help him out, you do want to help him out, don't you?"

Antonio made a weak noise.

"Antonio, I'm not giving you a fucking choice," Alfred was serious, "I've already made my mind up. You're moving in with Gilbert. I'll help you with everything and I know Gilbert would too so it's not like you have to clean out your apartment by yourself. And if you think you're going to get out of this, then you won't. Imma call Gilbert and make sure he *makes* you. I won't tell him about all your problems but I really think you should talk to him, okay?"

"Okay..."

"Good, okay! I'm going to call him."

From the one-sided phone conversation, Matthew could tell that Gilbert was on board with having his friend move in suddenly, even if he didn't know *why now*.

Matthew had a feeling that Gilbert would have to know more than he let on.

Once Alfred hung up, he sighed deeply.

"I know it's scary," Alfred said carefully, "but I promise everything will be okay. I'll make sure it's okay, okay?"

"Okay," Antonio said weakly. "You're such a good friend Amigo."

Matthew stayed standing at the door, breathing quietly, until Alfred left the apartment with Antonio and only silence remained.

Chapter 13

Alfred wasn't back by lunch time so Matthew sat on the couch and made himself comfortable as he turned on the TV. After that eventful morning, he wanted nothing more than to see what the media had to say about the murders. All the bodies *had* to have been discovered by now and with matching signatures, the frenzy would be unbelievable.

He watched with anticipation as the presenter spoke, moving from mundane topic to topic. From the weather to traffic conditions. Tensions rose inside Matthew as the program was reaching its end but there was *nothing* covered about the Trail Killer leaving him empty with disappointment. That was impossible. His activities last night should've made *headlines*. Matthew changed the channel to another news station and started digging through forums on his phone.

There was a lot of chatter and confusion because while the bodies had been discovered, no one seemed to know any details. If anything, all the discussion was just curiosity and fear as people wondered if each individual crime scene *was* the Trail Killer. It seemed that the police were keeping things under wraps. Maybe they just needed to actually confirm it was the Trail Killer? Matthew hadn't left identifying markings before so he supposed it was reasonable enough the police were being secretive. Right now, they might assume it was the work of someone else entirely.

But Matthew knew it was only a matter of time before confirmation came out. He'd just have to be patient. He couldn't wait to see the hell that broke loose when everyone knew.

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It was the middle of the afternoon and Matthew was still home alone. Usually, he preferred that but he wished he knew what was going on on Alfred's end. He was restless and bored and he wanted to know how the events he set up had panned out, but all he could do was wait.

He let his thoughts wander as he paced around the house, eventually making his way to the bathroom. Being home alone, he didn't bother locking the door as he sat himself on the counter and leaned against the mirror. One hand pulled his legs in while the other flicked his blade, open and closed, open and closed.

He was never without the blade. He always felt a stark absence when he was without it. It was now a part of him, an extension. It was a tool for the new identity he had crafted and he didn't know who he was without it.

And now he's come to realise he didn't know who he was with it either.

Matthew was annoyed that he had come across Antonio at all last night. Why couldn't he just have killed Antonio and moved on? Because now, everything Antonio had said was echoing through his head, heart and soul.

Matthew flicked the blade out and with a sigh made eye contact with his reflection. He tapped the blade on the glass, unable to stab slice or cut what was on the other side.

It wasn't a question of 'who' because he didn't know *who* he was. He knew that reflection was 'him', Matthew understood that was what he looked like but it didn't really make him feel like 'him'. That

was just his body and everything everyone saw him for. They saw him for his surface and nothing that lurked underneath.

Before all of this, he knew who he *wanted* to be. Shamefully, he had wanted to be just like his brother. He wanted to *be* his brother because being Alfred came with everything Matthew never had. He knew what he wanted from who he wanted to be. He knew it would get him unconditional love, attention and *belonging*.

He thought there had to be something wrong with him because he wasn't like his brother and didn't get what his brother got.

He thinks about who he was *meant* to be. He detested the thought that he was *meant* to be who he was before all of this, and therefore *meant* to be unloved, forgotten and used. Because of a lifetime of neglect and rejection, Matthew found that he resented who he 'naturally' was. That facade that controlled him, suffocated him... He didn't *want* to be who he was before, but the more he thought about it the more he realised that he never had a fucking choice. Life had chosen for him and being *that* was *him*, who he was '*meant*' to be. And apparently, he was just 'meant' to be some lonely loser who was never destined to belong.

Was that how Antonio felt? Like he was meant to suffer? He must because that was the only thing that made sense to Matthew because Antonio had everything and all the help he could ever want and he *still* chose otherwise. But Matthew knew how hard it was when you've only ever been defined by a facade.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if Matthew could have still gotten what he wanted from who he was *meant* to be. But the facade allowed others to use him. He was *meant* to be kind at the expense of his own boundaries. He was *meant* to be quiet because no one listened. He was *meant* to be giving to the point he had nothing left to give. Caring but never cared for. Helpful but never helped. Used.

The word 'meant' had lost all meaning and didn't even feel like a word now. Seriously, say it out loud. Is it really an English word?

Through a lifetime of painful dismissal, Matthew realised that no one respected those traits despite expecting him to embody them. They wanted him to be that way, to be 'weak' because it benefited them. And because it benefited them, Matthew threw himself into acting that way because he had been trying so hard for approval... Was that really him? Was he those things? Was it really all 'Matthew' was?

That's what 'Matthew' was. And now that's what Matthew isn't. Matthew didn't know who he was now. Or if he was anyone at all. Because right now he just felt like he only existed in his mind, a place separate from reality where all his thoughts were scrambled.

It's a good thing that Matthew grew resentful of others and not himself, otherwise it might have been him on that bridge preparing to jump. He felt evil for blaming others but he knew it was where the blame belonged. Because Matthew had tried so damn hard and he knew it wasn't his fault. He only felt evil because, for the longest time, he was made to believe he was being 'nice' by suffering. Anything short of that and he wasn't being 'nice' anymore. And he was *Matthew*! And *Matthew* was *nice*.

Antonio's facade might not be so inflated if he was naturally kind to the point that he wouldn't blame others for his problems. Matthew could only assume that Antonio's blame wasn't misplaced

because he caused his own distress. Didn't Antonio know he had more support than Matthew could ever dream of? Genuine friends that would drop everything to make him feel better?

Matthew couldn't find resentment towards Antonio but he didn't want to see him again. It wasn't like Antonio knew they were so alike, both slaves to the expectations of others... only Matthew was able to stop caring and he was saved.

But he supposed he did care, didn't he? Because the opposite of caring was indifference and just thinking about it had him digging his nails into his palm as his muscles twitched with grief-

He'd have to take his anger out again tonight.

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It was almost dinner time when Alfred came back and Matthew was surprised to hear talking. At first, he thought someone was with him and Matthew was prepared to eavesdrop but then he realised Alfred was on the phone. But then Alfred hung up as he put a case on the kitchen counter and sighed. He looked like he hadn't slept for days as he rubbed his eyes and Matthew waited for Alfred to spot him.

But when his brother just stared blankly at his phone Matthew made sure to catch his attention before he locked himself in his room again.

"So did everything turn out alright?"

Matthew could only guess what Alfred had been up to all day because he seriously doubted Alfred would fill him in and tell him about his day like any other brother.

"Hmm, what?" Alfred blinked.

"How's Antonio? What happened?"

"Oh, yeah, Antonio's fine, he just had some drunk adventure last night and so he decided to come here instead of go home. He's safe now, so..."

Matthew knew he had to say *something* to keep the conversation going, but luckily Alfred did.

"Look, about last night... I probably should've told you that I told all my friends they're welcome here anytime... Antonio's just a sad drunk so he came here, y'know? I'm sorry if that scared you that someone broke in. I don't know what you would've been thinking. I bet it didn't look good though haha."

"Yeah, it wasn't what I was expecting to see this morning." It didn't seem he'd be able to get anything more from his brother so Matthew looked at the case Alfred brought with him. "What's that?"

Alfred's eyes darted between Matthew and the case, almost conflicted before a sheepish look came on his face.

"Okay, I totally forgot to run this by you but I've been thinking for a while that I should probably get a gun."

"*What*?" Matthew's hands felt numb. He couldn't pinpoint why. Many things went through his head like, a gun?! How was that necessary?! It seemed like an escalation. Matthew didn't want Alfred to have a gun because he really didn't *need* it. And if Alfred had been thinking about it for so long why didn't he tell Matthew??

Alfred didn't pick up on any of Matthew's anxiety as he continued to talk cheerily.

"Yeah, cool right? Now you can rest easy at night, alright? If it comes down to it, I'll be a hero for both of us. I know I go on and on about 'murder bad' but it's okay if it's self-defense and not because I'm a psycho. Now I actually *hope* a killer breaks in so I can make one less killer in the world."

Did... If Alfred had been thinking about this for a while, did bringing Antonio home last night and staging it as a break-in finally tip Alfred over the edge to make his decision? Matthew really shouldn't have done that. Now Alfred probably felt justified worrying about future break-ins. But if that was the case shouldn't his brother get tighter security for the house instead of bringing home a lethal weapon??

Alfred took it out to show him. He flicked the case open with a fluid motion and pulled out a *handgun*, and yep, it was indeed a *gun* before putting it back in the case.

"Um," Alfred seemed unsure. "So, how have you been?"

Matthew kept his confusion at bay and the change of subject. Everything felt so surreal and he felt like he was falling behind the conversation.

"Fine, I'm always fine."

Alfred snorted before schooling his face.

"Sorry, but what a mood. Anyway, I mean, how have you been *going*?"

Matthew just shrugged and Alfred sighed.

"So... if you've having any bad or extreme sorts of feelings, just know I wouldn't blame you. We've- Everyone's gone through so much and you've lost Arthur too. Plus I know you knew Francis so... I'm sorry if it feels like I haven't been here for you. I kinda feel like I've been a shit brother because I don't really know how you're coping. It just seems that you're doing fine, but that's how you always come off so I really don't know."

Matthew let a moment of silence pass and Alfred just looked at him expectantly.

"Of course I'm sad about it," Matthew said as he was obligated to. "But it's nothing I can't handle, eh?"

Even if Matthew was falling apart, he didn't know if he could actually talk to Alfred about it. But would it take for him to fall apart for Alfred to do something about it? Alfred would be obligated to care, wouldn't he? And then when the obligation went away Matthew would be all alone yet again. Alfred would be distracted by something else and Matthew would once again be a shadow in his own home.

Alfred had a look of suspicion on his face before sighing and nodding.

"Okay, I'll keep checking in though."

Then he followed it up with a pat on Matthew's shoulder. Matthew froze up when his brother moved and tried not to let it show how weird it was. Alfred didn't seem to pick up on it though, already reaching for the case, experimenting with its weight before a thought came to him-

"Hey Mattie, I invited Ivan over for a bit, is that alright with you?"

Why was Alfred asking if it was okay if Ivan was already coming? But Matthew supposed his brother already knew his answer. Why would 'Matthew' ever say no?

"Yeah, I don't mind," Matthew said pleasantly. "But I thought you didn't want to talk to him?"

"Well, I've toughened up and I really think I should tell him, plus I have a gun now so if something goes wrong..." The last part was a joke, but Alfred's laugh sounded weak. "Yeah, I'm a bit nervous but I'm not going to *shoot him*. I don't think I could even kill someone I hate."

Alfred put the gun in his room and Matthew watched him tuck it under his bed.

"What made you change your mind?" Matthew said from the doorway.

"Well, maybe doing something about it might make him feel better. Might make a lot of people feel better," Alfred mumbled before running a hand through his hair and shaking his head. "Okay, never mind. I should probably tell you now. I'm gonna start going back out at night."

What?! Was his brother stupid? Matthew thought he'd given up after finding two bodies and getting in trouble with the law? Was his brother really going to risk rolling the dice again and getting in worse trouble than last time??

Alfred was still talking.

"Just *sleeping* while people are *dying* makes me feel like shit so I can't just do *nothing*! Especially when I *can* do something. I really doubt I'll get *murdered* if I'm careful and seriously, that bastard asshole works by surprising people on their own so I'll be fine if I'm with others. So don't worry about me Mattie but just promise you won't try and stop me."

Great, he needs to find out all he can about what Alfred's planning.

"I didn't try to stop you before," Matthew forced himself to say. "Just keep me updated about what you do out there or I might get worried..."

"Thanks, you're the best bro," Alfred said and hit him on the shoulder. The gesture felt more awkward to Matthew. "Also, can you stay in your room when Ivan gets here? Pretty please? I'm gonna be talking about some sensitive stuff... plus he might get angry so..."

Matthew just nodded. He'd just eavesdrop again.

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Matthew didn't see when Ivan came in, he was already in his room. But he heard and crept to the door.

"You want to talk," Ivan said, his tone guarded and on edge. "About *my sister* and the *Trail Killer*."

The name 'Trail Killer' wasn't said with the malice Matthew expected. But instead, almost gleefully, like Ivan couldn't *wait* to talk about the serial killer more.

"Yeah, I thought it would be better to do in person. At least the Government can't track our texts now!"

Alfred awkwardly laughed and Matthew didn't hear if Ivan reacted.

"Anyway, want a drink or something? Cus I think this chat could be a bit... confrontational? Heavy? You're not gonna like it."

"Then get to the point," Ivan demanded.

"I um, was kinda... fuck, I feel really nervous just blurting it out. I found Natalya."

"You *found her?*"

"Yep, I was kinda hunting the Trail Killer and... yeah, I don't know how to explain. I know you think I'm stupid for it because it wasn't like I could do anything. But yeah, I... I also found Lovino when he got..."

Alfred cleared his throat, his voice sounded painful.

"I found Natalya too. I was too late both times. I don't know what telling you would do but please believe me when I say that I'm so so sorry I couldn't... I didn't, I *don't* know, I just-"

Alfred was frustrated.

"I was playing vigilante, okay? And so that's why I was such a shitty friend at the funeral and I really wish I could help you feel better and that *everyone* could feel better because this *fucking bastard's* been ruining everyone's lives and I *have* to make it stop right? And I know you'd feel the same. The two of us are kinda the same and we both just have to *do* something about it, right?"

"Why are you so... nervous wreck?"

"Cus I don't know how to put it nicely and you could get really upset about it."

"I am already upset. Why didn't you tell me you found her?"

"Well how the fuck would it help? It couldn't change that- I just happened to come across her and man, I was so fucked up when I realised who she was. I couldn't even call the cops right away because I couldn't stop crying. I just- I'm telling you now because I don't wanna keep things from you when I want us to work together because we hate the same asshole, right?"

"Hate is such a tame word," Ivan said, mock trivially. "I will accept you not telling me, because it would not have changed a thing."

"Okay, I'm going to assume we're cool then. Because what I really to say is, what if we both went out there? If we both went hunting for the Trail Killer and saving who we could?"

"Like vigilante?"

"Yeah, I don't know, I don't wanna shit on the cops and say they're not doing enough... but extra people out there couldn't hurt, right? We could just keep an eye for suspicious activity and watch people who could be targets? I don't know, we'll have to figure out a game plan but whatdoya think?"

There was a pause as if Ivan was thinking about it.

"I like this idea, I cannot just sit still while others are killed... while the Killer is still out there," Ivan said this like it was an *opportunity*. "Natalya would want me to spit on face of killer."

"She totally would," Alfred said quietly. "I've already got told off by Ludwig after... well, I found *her*. I guess it was because I was carrying a baseball bat around but that was kinda dumb of me. Ludwig said 'don't go out again, leave this to the police' so yeah, we're not meant to be doing this-"

"So we just don't get caught," Ivan said gleefully.

"Exactly," Alfred responded. "Anyway, I have a gun now and I can hide that in my pocket. Plus Gil's on board so he can keep a tab on where Ludwig and other cops are so we can just cover the areas where they aren't."

"Gilbert?" Ivan said in a measured voice.

"Yeah I know you guys have had your differences and all, but he lost Francis so he's 100% on board. Y'know? The enemy of my enemy type shit? It means more numbers. And I've got Antonio on board. He lost Francis too and I think he could really use... I don't know how to put it beside bluntly, something to live for, y'know? Plus if there's more of us then we won't get targeted. The killer is a fucking coward and has always gone for someone alone."

Matthew bit his lip as he listened to all this unfold. His brother going out again was one thing, but tracking so many people?

"Currently, I am living for bashing in this killer's skull with a metal pipe," Ivan said, too cheerfully.

"Sheesh, dude, I don't blame you for feeling that way, but we should definitely try to keep the asshole alive so they can get arrested by the police and everything. Because y'know... others. Others would want to see justice and I personally think that the Killer would get the easy way out if they just *die* and don't actually *rot* in prison, y'know?"

"I will mangle but not kill."

"Sounds good," Alfred laughed with bitter support.

"No one hates this coward Killer more than me."

"Bet," Alfred challenged.

"So, who else is becoming vigilante?"

Matthew held his breath and shifted closer to the door.

"I did think about asking Feliciano but... no. He'd probably get scared wandering around at night even if he was with us. And... I think he's better off not thinking about the Trail Killer. Um, we're friends so I'm just gonna say it but I want to help you but I'm in over my head so I don't know how

but maybe... I think you should talk to Feli. Cus Feli lost Lovino so he knows what it's like to lose a sibling..."

Matthew expected Ivan to be against that idea but instead of a rebuttal he only heard silence.

"Yeah, anyway, the vigilantes so far is just me, Gilbert, Antonio and you. I really think that *doing* something would be a great way to direct your anger. It made me feel better when I started looking."

"Believe me, it is big dream of mine to take out my anger on such evil. I won't even need to go with group, I can protect myself. This Killer is weak and cannot take me."

"I don't want you to underestimate the killer but yeah, I can't really picture you dying. Seriously, you'll probably make the killer shit himself."

"He will when pipe crashes into his guts."

Matthew cringed. That would not be happening. Ivan knew nothing about what he was getting himself into and Matthew knew everything. If Matthew *was* like Alfred, he'd think about challenging Ivan, toying with him and making him question himself. But Matthew didn't get this far without caution, despite how entertaining the idea was.

"We're talking like we'll definitely find him," Alfred laughed. "Just be prepared for the chance that we *don't* find him. Because it's pretty unlikely."

"I will take chance. Taking chance is better than staying home."

"Yeah, that's what I think. So I'm thinking that because we're such a big group our alibi could just be something like we were having a night out, nothing actually suspicious if we were travelling by ourselves so we shouldn't actually get in trouble. But that also means we can't go out every night, because if Ludwig gets suspicious then he'd *definitely* stop us. For good. So I'll make a group chat and we can organise when we go out and stuff."

Thank goodness they weren't planning on going out every night or Matthew wouldn't be able to breathe. He would just have to go out on days that Alfred and the group *didn't*. Hopefully, it would be easy enough to find out since he *lives* with Alfred.

"I will go out every night."

"I'm definitely not gonna stop you dude, in fact, I might join you. We can just keep it secret from the others."

Matthew's face fell and he couldn't even say he was surprised.

The two of them started organising. Alfred suggested he'd split his previous routes with Ivan so they wouldn't actually be travelling together. Fantastic. Matthew could track Alfred, but he couldn't track Ivan. If they weren't travelling together then he wouldn't actually know where Ivan was and only have a vague idea of where he was patrolling. Which would be *anywhere* that Alfred *wasn't*. Matthew didn't like this.

Chapter 14

When it became obvious he wasn't going to hear anything else important and Alfred took Ivan to his room, Matthew gave up on eavesdropping. He'd heard enough and as worrisome as it was, he didn't want to spend all night thinking about it. It wasn't an actual problem until his brother and everyone he'd roped in were *on* the streets. Hopefully, Matthew would have a chance another day to get more information. Until then he could come up with plans and countermeasures tomorrow.

Now, he just wanted to enjoy tonight, especially since it seemed that it could be his last night without paranoia. The last night before the media caught on AND before both Alfred and Ivan were on the streets.

So he'd just take as many as he could tonight then adapt to the new rules tomorrow.

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It almost felt mechanical how he acted. He had the routine down and confidence did the rest. Of course, he knew better than to act like it was *easy*, pride would certainly jinx him and the last thing he wanted was to be stopped over a dumb oversight. But with each slash of the blade, he was finding this becoming a comfortable routine.

Matthew would corner or sneak up and take someone by surprise. His steady hand made quick work and then he was on his way to the next victim that crossed paths with him. He was definitely faster than before and he moved with a purpose, enjoying the thrill of stalking the streets of the city.

But as he weaved through the streets it didn't escape his notice that the atmosphere had changed again. Used to observing over participating, Matthew was able to notice more police cars around and on the streets. They were easy enough to avoid without detection, he certainly couldn't run the risk of catching their suspicion when he had bloody rags in his pocket from wiping his blade so many times. Running a DNA test on that would certainly implicate him, to say the least.

Matthew wasn't surprised there was an increase in surveillance. With the bodies found from the previous night, whether they believed it was the Trail Killer or someone else so inspired, murder was murder and they were probably worried about the worsening state of the city. As they should be. The thrill of the city coming undone despite their best precautions urged him on more than it should've.

He was interested to see if Alfred, stupid enough to go out even with an alibi, would be picked up by the increased surveillance. After tonight, all eyes will be on the streets and wannabe vigilantes might not get off with only a slap on the wrist.

Oh yeah, Matthew would have to follow Alfred closely. His brother's efforts would certainly be entertaining.

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Matthew surprised himself when he made it back home and it was the early hours of the morning. He supposed he might've got carried away, but with each addition to his growing number of kills he yearned for *more*, to push it further and really make an impact.

A couple of times throughout the night, he heard sirens in the distance and the screeching of car tyres as what sounded like a convoy closed in on an area he previously 'visited'. That had only spurred him on to run further away and add more to his total.

Of course, he kept his sensibilities and always kept himself at a distance. It was just as easy to leave evidence as it was to not. It was just a matter of being aware. He knew how frustrated investigators would be and after tonight, police would be *scrambling*.

He had killed 13. His highest count yet. Matthew could only reason that he was worried he wouldn't have an opportunity to later because why else would he spend all night hunting human lives?

The answer was for fun. The rush of one led to another and he wanted to see how big he could take this. The violent act brought him the power he never had and the reputation that came with that felt like well-deserved respect.

Worst of all, despite being up all night he wasn't even tired. He just found himself wishing time would move by faster so he could see the *reactions* sooner.

When the police find out. When the media report it. When fear creeps into the city. When Alfred sees... and realises a hero can't save the day.

Matthew lay in bed with his eyes closed for a long time, trying to force himself to sleep and skip to the morning.

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When Matthew awoke at breakfast he was exhausted. As nice as it was to lay in bed now that his efforts had caught up to him, he couldn't shut his eyes once he thought about the news and scrambled for his phone.

Nothing. It seemed impossible. Surely there would be *something*, even if misdirected or misunderstood. But there was nothing. The top headlines were a world record being broken and some feel-good a story about a small business starting a program to help the homeless. It almost seemed foreign to have positive stories on the news. Clearly, he'd gone overboard these past few days and police were being extra thorough with their examinations. Matthew supposed that made sense, the police would really hate to admit the Trail Killer had escalated and they were probably hoping for something else, anything else as an explanation. But even at face value, there was no other explanation and an experienced cop could see that. Which was likely why the media was silent for the time being.

But to be honest it was driving him a little crazy. He didn't like being ignored. But the conspiracies online kept him sane and he knew the uproar the internet would create when the confirmation finally happened would be enough to fuel him for years.

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It was almost lunch when Alfred woke up and Matthew assumed his brother didn't know he was home because Alfred played music loudly and didn't try to keep the noise down as he made himself 'breakfast'. *Assumed*, because maybe Alfred would do that anyway. He was densely inconsiderate.

Matthew couldn't be bothered to leave his room and tell Alfred to keep it down because that might start an unnecessary confrontation. Besides, Matthew was preoccupied with something more entertaining and something that let everything else fade into the background.

His newspaper collection fit in his drawer now, but with many more additions to come, he really thought he should do something about it. He sat cross-legged on the floor with the blade in hand as he cut out all the relevant articles and binned the excess paper. Looking over his past kills was invigorating and he couldn't wait until his drawer was filled with clippings from his growing career.

It took him a moment to realise that the sudden change in music from the other room was *not* a new song, but rather a ringtone. Alfred answered loudly as he continued to make breakfast and it became immediately obvious to Matthew that he put his phone on speaker. How incredibly convenient.

"Wassup?" Alfred answered.

"Not much! Things have been pretty dull since yesterday."

"That's good, right? Is Antonio okay? He's doing alright isn't he?"

"Of course he's doing alright! More than alright because he's with me and I'm awesome! You just said to call you and let you know whatever so there's your update!"

Oh, this must be Gilbert. Matthew quietly shut the newspaper drawer as he listened in.

"Hell yeah, glad to hear. I'm so glad he's got you."

"I bet he's glad he's got me too!"

Matthew cringed at the self-inflated ego.

"I hope he's gonna be alright for our meeting tonight," Alfred sighed. "What's he up to now?"

Meeting tonight? There was Matthew's chance to get information. But he didn't know how the meeting was going to happen. He doubted it would be over the phone so he wouldn't be able to eavesdrop.

From the phrasing of a meeting, he had a feeling it would be in person... Alfred would go somewhere and Matthew would track where. But how would he get the details of the meeting?

"Still sleeping," Gilbert said. "-Oh yeah, when are you gonna speak to Ivan?"

"Uh," Alfred sounded guilty. "I already have, I just forgot to tell you. Hacker voice; he's in!"

"Booo, if we're gonna be a team you have to tell me everything! That's not awesome."

"Yeah, sorry, I was just tired last night is all."

"I guess I'll let it slide this time then," Gilbert declared. "Yesterday was a big fucking deal, right? For everyone. Even Ludwig. Ever since he's got that promotion I think he only gets like, 5 hours of sleep. Tops. I don't know how he can stay awesome like that."

"Sheesh that's rough buddy. What the fuck is he even doing? Wait, does he have to patrol all night? Ugh, just another way that *bastard's* fucked with us."

"Yeah, he does some shit at night and also during the whole day. I don't know what his schedule looks like but don't worry, I have an awesome plan to get my hands on it." Gilbert laughed chaotically.

"Hell yeah, I know I can count on you," Alfred encouraged.

"Pfft, of course. Being the big bro of the best cop in this city has its awesome perks. I bet I can get heaps of useful info from him."

Matthew would have to get any information Gilbert passed to Alfred from his brother. It shouldn't be too hard. He could play the concerned card, say that he didn't like Alfred going out but if Alfred told him things he'd feel more comfortable. Or he could just continue sneaking because did he really believe Alfred would tell him *everything* and not water it down?

He'd have to figure out how to play it once he knew Alfred had information.

"Yeah, I bet you can. Do you have anything new?"

"I don't know. I think there's something I can get from him before tonight's meeting. I kinda feel like an asshole for doing it but then I just tell myself I'll be a double awesome brother to make up

for it!"

If Matthew couldn't get the information at the meeting he'd have to try and get it after. Besides, while they were all having their meeting... he knew where they were. They were off the streets so tonight might be the last night in a while he can roam freely.

"He's been more stressed these past couple of days. I think something's happened. Something that's being kept a secret for some reason. It could just be regular stress since he's now also doing that psychology stuff and making a killer profile- I'm still trying to get my hands on that, don't worry-"

"I know you can do it," Alfred was definitely throwing fuel onto a fire. But what Gilbert had said definitely caught Matthew's attention. He didn't know what a 'killer profile' was but he knew he wanted to see it.

"Thank fuck Ludwig was assigned leader of the Trail Killer case," Alfred continued. "If that was my brother I'd be so proud."

Matthew felt bitter.

"You know it. But something's definitely happened. It can't be stress cus he's been overworking himself for a while now but the other day he came home and he looked terrible. I don't know what it was, it's an older bro's instincts, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah I gotcha," Alfred laughed sheepishly. "Now I kinda feel bad because if he knew what we were doing he'd be so disappointed."

"No big deal," Gilbert said dismissively. "We just don't let him know!"

Chapter 15

Alfred left before dinner without saying a word. That was fine by Matthew, he ate dinner and tracked Alfred's location.

He didn't *know* where the meeting was taking place, but he assumed it was at Gilbert's. Simple deduction - it wasn't here and since they didn't *know* if Ivan was in or not, it couldn't be his. And thanks to Alfred, now Matthew knew where Gilbert, Antonio and Ludwig lived. Whenever Alfred left, the 'meeting' was over and Ivan would have left too. Until then, Matthew was safe.

So Matthew took to the streets, taking in the fresh air as night fell over the city.

Maybe it was the route he chose, but he noticed a lot of people out and about. Well, not a lot compared to other cities that didn't have active serial killers, but... more than there should be. Matthew could only think that because it had been a while since there was a public incident - or even a while since the media mentioned him *at all*, everyone had been lulled into a false sense of security.

How could they forget? Matthew knew that attitudes would change when his acts of escalation were broadcast for everyone to see and that thought put a bounce in his step.

Maybe the population were able to push it out of their minds because on nearly every street Matthew turned down there was a different police car parked. He didn't want to stare but it was too dark to tell how many, or if, there were officers in each car. The city's police force couldn't be that well equipped.

But when he got closer to the license plate, every time he'd see a different city or state printed on the back.

It looked like the police had borrowed officers from all over the country to try and get the city under control.

Matthew didn't show any adverse reaction and continued walking. Even if they didn't know the truth behind the recent killings, they were taking it seriously. Good. But Matthew wished he knew about the security from the news or the internet instead of finding out while on the streets. At least then he could see the public's reaction to it.

But the police reaction was amusing. He had to be doing something right to get this sort of reaction, like an achievement of sorts.

Instead of killing tonight, Matthew supposed he'd have to get a feel for the new atmosphere. It would certainly frustrate law enforcement when they imported all this help and it turned out for nothing... Though because nothing would happen tonight they'd probably convince themselves that was a success. Perhaps it was, but it wasn't like they could keep these measures up forever.

Matthew continued to walk around and observe but couldn't help the feeling that he was being observed too. He didn't like it. It wasn't something he'd felt before. He glanced around and saw a patrolling officer watching him from the other side of the street. Despite his discomfort, Matthew found it easy to continue to act casually. Without changing his demeanour, he walked to the nearest supermarket like that had been the reason for him being on the streets all along.

A weight was off his shoulders the minute he stepped inside and wondered with amusement how Alfred's gang would handle the extreme surveillance. He was sure that *one* of them would break under the pressure or maybe have second thoughts about their excursions...

...As if.

Matthew browsed the aisles, he needed to buy something or his cover wouldn't hold. Groceries were the obvious choice and he mentally went through cooking ingredients he could use for the next week as he filled his basket. He didn't expect to be interrupted from his musings.

"Hey! Hey!" A cheerful voice caught his attention and Matthew reacted a second later because he couldn't believe that someone was talking to *him*.

"Sorry, I was just thinking eh?" Came his pleasant excuse in a pleasant voice as he tore his eyes to see *Feliciano* skipping up and waving to him (despite the bags he was carrying with each hand).

"That's alright! I'm always off in my own little world. Sometimes someone could be talking to me and I wouldn't even hear them. So I can't blame you!"

Matthew hadn't seen Feliciano in years. He couldn't help but wonder who Feliciano thought he was approaching.

It didn't matter. Matthew could just entertain him anyway.

"What are you doing here?" He asked conversationally.

"Oh? Me? Shopping silly!" Then Feliciano squinted and ran a nervous finger down his face. "Or I was... Actually, I kind of lost track of time and now I'm waiting to be picked up. There's no way I can walk home, it's dark and scary out there!"

Matthew hummed in both acknowledgement and agreement- then happened to catch a glimpse of the cleaning section and struck by inspiration he walked over to browse. His eyes quickly raked over the products as he evaluated what he needed. He needed things that would be plausible to have at home and therefore wouldn't stand out, but also double for his... hobby.

"So what are you doing here?" Feliciano easily changed his tone as he cheerfully followed Matthew.

"I'm shopping. Needed some things for home and I didn't want to wait until the morning."

"Yeah! I thought the same thing! If I didn't come now then I'd never come at all!"

"So you came when it was dark?" Matthew was a little confused by Feliciano, always accidentally contradicting himself if only because of his oblivious nature.

"I didn't leave when it was dark..." Feliciano said sheepishly. "I just got distracted..."

Feliciano was known to be quiet airheaded so Matthew believed it.

"Are you following me around to stay distracted?"

"Maybe~ I just want to talk to you! Talking is fun." Feliciano always sounded so earnest it made Matthew feel less emotionally isolated. It was hard to feel invisible when your personal space was

being violated.

"I don't mind, you can follow me all you like while you wait for your ride."

"Thanks- Oh! Did you need a ride? You should come with me! It'll be really fun and we could listen to music and sing along~"

Feliciano's intense optimistic energy was really overwhelming but Matthew could only imagine that it was forced. That it was a facade. Was it a facade this whole time?

He thought back through the years of having known Feliciano. He didn't think it was as intense as before, though it might have just been because it wasn't directed at *him*. But Matthew still wondered if Feliciano was wearing a facade.

"It's alright. I've got a way home."

Feliciano seemed disappointed but not upset. Maybe he did want the company. Matthew kept talking to him as he went to check out and it didn't feel like obligation. If anything, he was coming from a selfish place where he wanted to pretend that this was a common occurrence for him and Feliciano's friendship was something he truly had... even if Feliciano thought he was Alfred. Any friendship at all where Matthew would run into acquaintances while shopping... Matthew pushed away the ache that came with his lonely existence and distracted himself with waiting with Feliciano, inside the store because he could sense the Italian's hesitance to go outside. Even as they chatted from behind the glass doors Matthew could see Feliciano's eyes flicker outside every now and then nervously.

Matthew entertained talking about the Trail Killer and Lovino. He was craving a discussion because of the media silence and since Feliciano had just assumed he was Alfred then talking to him about the topic would be really easy. Besides, Matthew really liked hearing about the Trail Killer.

"How are you doing?" Matthew phrased it sensitively so Feliciano *knew*.

"Oh, I guess I forgot to ask! I'm fine! I've been cooking a lot for my friends, especially Ludwig because he's really really busy with work and so I've been bringing him food~ That's why I'm shopping now- I was meant to cook earlier but then I kind of forgot then I realised I didn't have any ingredients and now here I am! How about you?"

Matthew didn't know if Feliciano actually *knew* what he meant when he asked.

"Actually, I haven't been doing so well." Matthew paused as he thought about his phrasing but even at the slightest lull in his sentence, Feliciano jumped into reacting. Other shoppers glanced over as Feliciano made a sudden distressed sad noise and pulled a matching face as he started grilling Matthew as to why he was doing well. It was a little overwhelming.

"I'm just a little sad about... you know. Everyone we've lost." Matthew quickly explained. "That's why I asked how are you doing... I meant since Lovino died?"

Feliciano's face carefully lost all emotion. Matthew waited.

"I think I'm doing okay," his tone was expressionless but his face was trying. "I'm sad but I'm also angry and I've never really been angry before. That was Lovino, he was always kind of angry. But

being angry kind of hurts- like this-"

Feliciano held his fist up and squeezed, his arm shaking with how hard he clutched his hand.

"It just hurts me because it's just wrapping around me and I can't get out... Do you think that's how Lovi felt? Do you think it hurt him and that's why he stayed angry?"

Matthew didn't know what to say beyond a shrug or headshake as Feliciano talked.

"Do you think he's still angry?" It wasn't asked with the fragile vulnerability of a fresh gaping wound, yet there was still some tenderness. Matthew thought about the promise he made to Lovino and everything that had led to that moment.

Lovino hadn't been angry in his last moments. But he had- he was angry at himself and no one else. But his emotions were probably more complicated than anger and Lovino, unwilling to look closely at himself with a magnifying glass threw a blanket of anger over it to hide it and over time his kneejerk reaction was to bite and bark.

(Maybe Lovino knew what was expected from him- a mask or facade and yet when he rejected it he wasn't rejected in turn. Maybe that's why Matthew hated him because this whole time he could've rejected everything that *crushed* him but deep down he knew he wasn't capable. So he resented Lovino who was. Matthew needed that facade because he didn't know who he was without it and Lovino forged his own identity.)

But Lovino wasn't angry, or just angry. He had been so many other things that defined him.

So the insightful answer was no.

"I know he wasn't always angry," Matthew offered. "And I know he loved you."

For whatever reason, he wanted to help Feliciano and try to leave him with some, if only a little bit of closure that helped him feel better and validated. But Matthew didn't know how to do that. If Alfred died what would Matthew *want* to hear?

If Matthew died... what would Alfred want to hear?

Matthew was jealous as he imagined Alfred forgetting all about him as he was surrounded by friends, too easily cheered up by their efforts.

"I know he loved me," Feliciano smiled, but it had an edge of sadness. "Do you think he knew I loved him? Oh- have I been a horrible brother I know I annoyed him and-"

"I think he knew too well," Matthew asserted. That guilt had been Lovino's demon.

"So yes?" Feliciano squinted at Matthew's cryptic answer but his frantic hands stilled.

"Yeah, I know he did. Even if he found you annoying he couldn't stay mad because he knew you loved him and he loved you."

It probably wouldn't help to say Lovino had died thinking of Feliciano. But wasn't that the ultimate piece of evidence for love? The last thing Lovino could think of was Feliciano...

Matthew's blood felt colder than usual as regret crept into his core. If he helped Antonio then surely he could've helped Lovino- *No*, he didn't owe anyone anything and if he thought he had power over anyone then he was wrong. It was by chance he was able to force Antonio's fate not towards redemption, but at least away from hell this time.

Antonio could always slip again and go down before anyone could stop him. Even if he didn't he wasn't inherently redeemed just because it seemed he was on the path of help. The facade could always choke him despite the hands reaching out to help...

"Yeah... I know he knew. Nonno tells me all the time..."

Then Feliciano lit up and was pointing past Matthew, who turned to see a police cruiser lingering by the doors.

"Ludwig's here! Come say hi!" Feliciano grabbed Matthew's arm as he skipped out towards the car, somehow able to switch moods at the drop of a hat. Maybe he had this conversation so often he couldn't get properly invested.

"Do you need a ride too?" Ludwig looked tired as he rolled down the window.

"No, I'm alright, thanks." Matthew wondered if Ludwig knew who he was talking to. Now it was just second nature to assume if someone was actually talking to him and looking him in the eye, they didn't know he was *Matthew*.

"We should wait here until his lift comes!" Feliciano basically pleaded.

"We can't," Ludwig said sympathetically before turning to Matthew. "Stay inside the store until your driver arrives. I'd feel better knowing you're safe."

Matthew just nodded.

"Can I stay with you Ludwig?" Feliciano begged. "Please?"

Ludwig seemed reluctant when he sighed.

"I'm working. I'm not supposed to have civilians with me when I'm on patrol."

"But Ludwig..." Feliciano whined again sounding desperate. "I don't wanna go back..."

Feliciano didn't want to be alone... Matthew really couldn't make a habit of this but he was considering stepping in-

"I know. I can drop you at my place if you'd prefer," Ludwig offered. "Gilbert's home and I know he'd look after you."

"Yes please! Oh! It could be like a sleepover! Will you join us Ludwig?"

"Fine - when my shift is over. But I won't do anything besides sleep. I need to get up early tomorrow."

"That's fine Ludwig!" Feliciano chirped as he finally got into the car, more than happy with the arrangements. "I'll keep your bed warm for you so when you get home it'll be extra comfortable."

"I look forward to it," Ludwig said softly, though Matthew was sure it was exhaustion talking. The officer really didn't look as sharp as previous meetings. "Now put your seatbelt on."

Feliciano giggled as he clipped it in then leaned out of the window as Ludwig put the indicator on and Matthew reached up to wave-

"Bye Matthew! Tell Alfred I said hi!"

His hand jerked to a stop.

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With bags of groceries weighing on his arms Matthew waited until Ludwig and Feliciano were out of sight before going straight home.

He had to admit he was a little worried. Anyone would assume it was paranoia but Matthew knew that he had to assume the worst.

So Feliciano was going to be dropped at Ludwig's, who lived with Gilbert, who was currently holding a meeting that *Alfred* was attending. Feliciano and Alfred were friends and Matthew just knew that Feliciano would start talking and without any sense of inhibition, *eventually* mentioning to Alfred 'Hey, I just saw your brother! You know, Matthew? Because I know who Matthew is and he's *not at home*' and then Matthew would have to deal with the fallout.

Not that he expected anything huge as implied by 'fallout', but it would definitely be an annoying and frustrating conversation that he'd rather avoid.

He hadn't been home long when his phone rang. Given how little he used his phone he left it at home (tip for the aspiring serial killers out there, in today's modern world phone data can be used to solve crimes) and given how little other people contacted him he could only assume who was calling.

It was Alfred and Matthew let it ring out. Maybe Alfred would just forget about it and Matthew wouldn't hear about it later. He checked to see Alfred was still at Gilbert's so the meeting was still on. Matthew didn't expect Alfred would leave just to check on him.

It caused him some anxiety that it could come up later and Matthew really didn't like the feeling. He'd had enough of a lifetime of anxiety, always worried about how to keep people happy with him. He didn't want to let the feeling rule him anymore.

Maybe it was impulsive, but it was a calculated impulse that had him leave the house again, this time with the intent to hunt. Matthew knew he decided earlier to only observe, but he knew if he played it safe, he could do just that *and* also kill again without letting the police stop him. He refused to be intimidated and he refused to stop.

Besides, the police couldn't keep track of *every* dark corner of the city. If Matthew was careful enough he could definitely kill right under their noses and they wouldn't hear a thing. Matthew didn't want to be stupid, because sticking his neck out was a risk and he didn't want to get caught over a stupid urge. But he had to kill at least one. Just to show he wouldn't be stopped and would *always* find a way around whatever measures thrown his way.

After some walking around he noticed that police only seemed to be in areas that were awake. Areas that had open shops and nightlife. It made sense, police were a limited recourse, after all. They would have to prioritize, even with all the additional help.

So Matthew went to the quieter suburbs. There were still police keeping an eye on the area, but they weren't walking the streets and only driving through. Which meant it would be all too easy for them to miss any activity. It was perfect. Matthew put on a pair of gloves and started the hunt.

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He managed to kill 2, and because he was wearing gloves he could move the bodies to ensure they were found long after Matthew had left the area.

When he got home his ringtone immediately demanded his attention. With annoyance, he checked his phone to see some more missed calls from Alfred, sporadically listed at random intervals. Then there were the text messages. They started about halfway through and seemed to alternate between attempted calls.

It was about exactly what he expected. Feliciano had spilled.

Alfred:
did you go out
at night? its dangerous did you really go out
???
just to go shopping too smh

feli told me he saw you when he went shopping

mattie where are you
mattie
mattie

are you still at that shop??

lemme know if you are
i can pick you up or have someone pick you up idk text me back already or pick up

is your phone flat???
if not mattie share me your location
**you're*

**wait no your I got it right*
asap just in case youre not at the shop or home

read in case youre alive or dead
schrodingers mattie ahahah

this would be really embarrassing if feli somehow mistook you he's kinda silly sometimes
all times actually

you're home right
im assuming youre home i cant picture otherwise

is your phone on silent or did you get home and put it down???
mattie i need to know where you are or at least tell me if youre ignoring me
im assuming youre ignoring me because youre smart and wouldnt be dead somewhere

maybe you left your phone at home ghughughughoughu
thats really dumb you should have your phone on you
for safety also how can you be without it???
maybe i'm just chronically online ahahaha Im joking tho
or did it fall in the toilet???
that's my biggest fear
biggest irrational fear tho

im trying to avoid makng everyone go on a manhunt if you dont want that then you need to answer
everyone thinks you wouldve just got an uber and obviously ik that because as if anyone would walk at night now but even if you did get an uber why go out??? you shouldve told me
you shouldve told me if you needed stuff i couldve got it before i came home then you couldve stayed home

okay I'm coming home now
please be there

Matthew frowned and put his phone on silent. He would have to try and convince Alfred he slept through them because it seemed that his brother was not going to let this go.

So that meant not replying to a single text because he was 'asleep'. Even if he wanted to nip this whole thing in the bud because knowing that it was coming and it would only have time to build up bigger the longer he left it... really made him uneasy.

He checked his brother's location to see he was almost home. Matthew didn't know if it was because of worry for *him* or because the meeting ended that made him leave. Though he supposed it was also possible and much more likely that the meeting ended long before and he got caught up in hanging out with his friends.

But Matthew supposed it was fortunate Alfred didn't leave earlier because Matthew wasn't home either and he didn't have an explanation for that. The idea made him want to slap himself for how careless that would've been- Actually, he wasn't done yet! He still needed to go through his post-kill routine! Before Alfred got back!

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Matthew only had a split-second warning of Alfred opening his door before the light was being turned on. Matthew closed his eyes, quickly pretending he was asleep as he let his breathing even out.

He wanted to open his eyes and see just what was going on. How his brother was staring so he could get some insight into just what the hell his brother was thinking, how he felt about learning that Matthew went out. Hopefully, it made Alfred uneasy because he cared. But Matthew didn't get to linger on the thought. The light was turned off and his door was shut. He heard Alfred's door and that was the last sound of the night.

Chapter 16

Alfred got up earlier than Matthew expected. It wasn't 'early', but not as late as usual. Matthew wondered if the days of Alfred sleeping in and moping were over because he had a purpose again. Even if that purpose was really... stupid. Though who was Matthew to judge? His own life purpose had a really ugly stigma yet it was the only thing he really cared about anymore.

Matthew threw his guard up when Alfred pulled a face, warning him that his brother did not *let it go* like Matthew hoped the night before.

"Mattie, have you checked your phone at all?" Alfred asked with extreme accusation.

"No?" His voice was innocent and he cocked his head. "Why? Did something happen?"

"Uh, yeah something happened. Mattie, why the fuck did you go out last night?"

Old Matthew would hate this confrontation and apologise for it all. If only just to keep the peace. Even now an apology sat on his tongue. But then he considered making Alfred feel like this 'confrontation' was unnecessary, just like all the ones that came before it. Matthew could gaslight him into believing anything Matthew wanted him to. It wouldn't even be hard because no one would ever expect that from him and after acting for so many years Matthew knew he could be convincing.

Or he could push back and *argue*. Call Alfred out on hypocrisy and demand he stop trying to control.

He restrained himself, no matter how satisfying finally causing conflict might be, Matthew needed to think strategically. Experience said that no matter what he did Alfred would only exhaust him so he ought to do something constructive. He needed to convince Alfred this would be the last time he ever went out so his brother would let it go and not breathe down his neck until he forgot about it.

"I just needed some things. I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Maybe he was dragging it out a little. It was the only form of defiance he could give.

"Really? That's it? You needed some stuff?" Alfred was in disbelief. "Couldn't've you have just waited for today?!"

"No, I really needed it."

"Well did you *have* to go out? *At night?!* If you needed it so bad then why didn't you go earlier?"

This could go back and forth for a while so Matthew just got to the point.

"I was safe. I got an uber so there's nothing to worry about, eh? Plus there's police everywhere so I didn't think anything would happen."

"Okay? And? You can't just *assume* you'll be safe!" Alfred looked like he was seconds away from pulling his hair. "You should've told me or something! I don't care if there's cops out but- ugh! You should've told me! I wanna say 'just tell me next time' but how about you just don't go out at night, okay? If you need anything just tell me and I'll get stuff for you!"

Matthew frowned as something came to him and he could tell Alfred caught that because he got more upset at the perceived defiance.

"It's dangerous out there! And you didn't even take your phone, did you? Do you know how many times I called you and texted you?!" Alfred was almost shouting, but there was something in his voice. "If you need shit in the middle of the night for some fucking reason then make me get it!"

Alfred waved his hands around like he was trying to calm himself down and squeezed his eyes with a grimace.

"I'm just- I'm not trying to be mean Mattie but it's just scary cus you never know what could happen when you leave the house anymore. So *please*, just don't do it, okay?"

"Okay. Sorry, I'll make you do it, I promise," Matthew whispered, afraid to put more of his heart out there. "I usually never go out so I'm sorry I forgot my phone. I won't go out again. I'm sorry I worried you."

If it kept Alfred happy, then Matthew would never let him find out if Matthew left again. Maybe he had just woken up vulnerable or because Alfred had so long to stew with his emotions, Matthew could believe that Alfred was angry because he was scared... because he did love Matthew. That was it, right? This was how his brother was showing it, with his brother's intensity directed at him as the sole recipient, it was convincing him.

It made Matthew feel something, made his dry eyes sting and his empty soul more vulnerable.

"Good. Thank fuck." Alfred believed him. "Because there's still a killer out there and he'd definitely go for someone like you. Even if you take a car what if something happens, y'know?"

"What do you mean, 'someone like me?'" Matthew was both hurt and offended because a statement like that couldn't be anything good and now Matthew was scared that his brother's intentions weren't as moving as he had just believed.

"Uh, y'know cus you're kinda a loner and you're quiet so... y'know."

Matthew was a fool. Alfred didn't love him if he thought little of him.

It seemed that Alfred didn't know because he couldn't keep eye contact or give a good explanation. Matthew kept the sour feeling that swelled inside off of his face. He didn't want to hear Alfred continue to explain what Matthew already knew he was forced to be so he just nodded like he was expected to, pretending just to accept it so he could move on.

"What about you?" He tuned his hurt tone to worried. "When are you going to go out again?"

"As soon as possible," Alfred muttered. "Don't worry Mattie, I'll be safe."

"So tonight?"

"Pretty much every night. It's the only way I'll feel better," Alfred sounded grumpy as he opened the fridge. "Can you make pancakes?"

"In a moment." Matthew brushed past and locked himself in the bathroom. He could make pancakes now, be obedient like he was supposed to be but he just needed a breather as the air grew thick. He told himself it was strategic because making Alfred wait, even if just a little was a form of defiance.

After a few moments of pacing, he sat on the ledge of the shower/bath and took the blade from his pocket to fidget with.

It felt like each day was a battle and he needed to make the best strategic moves possible. He needed to pull the right faces and say the right things every single day, one after another and they just kept coming. It was exhausting to be so sceptical and tense.

Did his facade even fall? Or just mutate into new constraints?

He hated who he used to be but he knew that was because he couldn't connect to his old self at all. And that was his old self, because that was real, if only an enhanced part of his personality to prop up a facade... just like Antonio.

Matthew had been kind. When did it become hard to be kind and it made him hurt? He had been a lover, not a fighter. He always advocated for peace and tried to make as many friends as possible - which was probably why it hurt so much when he failed. If he advocated for peace then why was he disturbing the peace? His form of love was dying for others, sacrificing himself for them... not killing for them. But he wasn't killing for anyone but himself. Did that mean he just didn't love anyone enough?

He knew he had *thought* he loved others... but when he thought about it he had never been mutually attached to anyone. At least not like how everyone around him cared for one another. He even thought that he wasn't attached to Alfred, but in that vulnerable moment where he was completely convinced Alfred loved him... Matthew felt the need to chase that because he couldn't fool himself when he said he cared for Alfred.

Which was really conflicting considering how else he felt about his twin brother.

Matthew had always been angry for not being found more interesting by others despite his efforts, which led to bitter jealousy of Alfred. He was so so jealous and it had eaten away at everything. He wanted love and he still thought that by being better he'd get it so he felt the need to be the nicest and the most giving and then once he broke 'better' meant murder. It meant power. He knew he was afraid of being forgotten and if he wasn't something big then he was nothing. And he was sick of feeling like nothing. He felt so invisible and he hated it he hated it. Killing made him feel something he had to keep doing it. It made him someone. Respected.

Because he didn't feel much anymore when he wasn't killing. Before, when he had been a slave to others, he felt like he was more expressive. But as he got older and his dreams died so did his emotions. He felt blank. When he wasn't blank he only felt bad emotions to the extreme, that pushed and pulled him around like a little boat caught in a large storm.

He had been painfully blank up until he killed Arthur.

Now whenever he wasn't comfortably numb, anticipation lingered when he thought about his accomplishments, which gave him a feverish level of excitement when he was participating. It made him feel a happiness he had never felt before when he was forced to play into others until his identity collapsed.

And yet here he was with a nostalgic ache deep inside that said if he was nice enough, he could earn his brother's love and respect, despite Alfred very much proving he didn't think highly of him.

Maybe he could try to delude himself that Alfred just didn't know he loved Matthew. In the past he would try to suck up to make Alfred realise... but now with more drastic thinking, Matthew could only think of drastic measures to make his own fucking twin realise he needs Matthew...

But Matthew didn't want to spend more time chasing. He's done enough chasing... even though a small part of him says if he pulled the right strings, he could make others chase this time. No.

Matthew would just have to wait for these feelings to pass. No doubt they'd be replaced when nighttime fell. Until then, he'd have to do the bare minimum to act as Matthew should, but without hopelessly sucking up just to try and feel a shred of the love he was ashamed to admit that he momentarily yearned for.

Matthew didn't feel the same when he left the bathroom. He didn't feel like a person as he operated on autopilot while sleepwalking. Maybe after he'd take a nap. He didn't have to worry about anything until night fell and his brother left. Said brother was just loitering around with his focus on his phone, still waiting on those pancakes.

Matthew wordlessly set about making them by himself and thought. It was frustrating that Alfred could make hypocritical demands and Matthew couldn't. He wasn't meant to know more than just Alfred going out so he didn't ask anything else. But he was going to find out either way. Every time Alfred left the house, so would Matthew. He needed to observe the changing environment anyway, Alfred and his friend's stupidity was certainly something he'd have to factor in. A couple of weeks of watching both the group and Alfred alone would definitely provide important information.

Alfred thanked him for the pancakes and surprised him with enthusiastic compliments about his cooking. Matthew shrugged, it was just pancakes. The same meal they had every single day for breakfast. But he wondered if the compliment was motivated by their unpleasant confrontation earlier and Alfred still felt tension, unknowing that Matthew had already moved on.

Or should have, because just sitting and eating breakfast in silence left him with an itch. It must've been the tension Alfred was holding onto.

"So how's Feliciano?" Matthew asked. "How's he been doing since Lovino died?"

"Oh, uh," Alfred put his phone down with a grimace and shrug. "He's been alright lately but has some moments where he's not. Y'know how it is. But he's got a lot of people looking out for him so he'll be okay, just gotta keep him distracted."

"That's reassuring." Matthew didn't know how it was.

"And since Lovi isn't here to keep an eye on Feli, guess I'll have to step up."

Matthew's throat felt tight, tighter than it should be when he just told himself he needed to go back to feeling pleasant nothing. Why did it have to be Alfred?

Matthew hoped that Feliciano would learn how to be better off without his brother but-

Lovino was the one living in the shadow of his brother. His anger was his hurt, and Matthew understood that.

It didn't matter now. He was sure everything would work out. It always did for everyone *else*.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Following Alfred's ragtag team of wannabe vigilantes was far too easy. Despite the large number of the group not one of them realised they had a tail. Matthew could see how easy it would be to fit some kills between while following. But for now, this was strictly reconnaissance but killing someone in an area the group had already passed through... it would be all too easy to get away with it happening right under their noses.

Once he had a feel for how the vigilante group operated he'd start killing again, but he also had to factor in that there were more eyes on the street than ever before. Police were still on every corner, but Matthew found them easy enough to slip by without detection. No doubt they were just trying to find out more about the marked murders and it was only a matter of time before they made the right connection.

One thing Matthew quickly noticed about the group was the mood teetered between being serious and having fun, often lingering on the latter. Maybe it was part of their bar-hopping or clubbing disguise, but it often felt like he was stalking a bunch of young adults just hanging out without anything suspicious going on. With the way they were all loudly talking and laughing about irrelevant topics, anyone would overlook them and assume nothing.

However, it didn't take long for Matthew to become aware of a festering feeling inside him as he was reminded of a righteous grudge. He didn't know *how* he blocked it out until now but like with a lot of hurtful things he always somehow forgot about them until they were right in his face and everything came back at once. This was the first time in years that Matthew had *seen* Gilbert *in person* and every time he said something in that grating voice of his to his friends and everyone laughed Matthew felt a pang of angst and fidgeted with his blade. Even at this distance, he was too close to that asshole.

If it was only Gilbert on the street... A vicious Matthew would have him join his friend Francis. But for now, he'd just have to settle on imaging the lecture he'd give as blood bathed the streets and freed himself from the turmoil he was once subject to.

He powered through the lingering foul feeling and found himself getting swept up the in friend's vibe that left Matthew feeling conflicted, feeling both included and like he was missing out. This was what normal people his age did and yet it was an alien experience for him. But as he was eavesdropping he couldn't help but find amusement in their conversation... And the situations they found themselves in.

One night the group almost had a heart attack when at 2 something in the morning a police cruiser flashed its lights at them and crossed onto the opposite side of the road to illegally pull over beside them.

"Let me do the talking," Gilbert said with complete confidence as he stepped up. His ego was just that big. "My awesome bro's a cop so there's no way we're getting in trouble- oh scheisse."

Matthew had crouched in an alley behind them and inched forward to see the scene. It was Ludwig, hardly looking impressed. Probably his default expression. Matthew felt a sense of amusement at

Gilbert's misfortunate situation and couldn't wait to see where it led.

Antonio started laughing and failed to stifle it, which made Gilbert turn around and glare at Antonio with clearly mock offence because it seemed Gilbert could see the humour in it too. As usual, he wasn't taking anything seriously.

"Hey, Ludwig! How's the detective investigation stuff going?" Alfred held back a giggle, which seemed to make it harder for Gilbert and Antonio to hold back their amusement. Ivan just stood there like he was just itching to keep going yet doing everyone a favour by staying patient and *not* walking off without them.

"What are you doing?" Ludwig's question was a loaded one, full of scepticism but no one was taking it seriously.

"We're going clubbing," Alfred said dismissively. "Y'know, I would've thought that clubs would've been shut down cus... y'know. But since they're open that must mean it's safe, right? So we're all going clubbing to celebrate!"

Ludwig's face ever so slightly changed at hearing that very incorrect statement, but the group was completely oblivious to it.

"Yeah bro, I thought I told you!" Gilbert added and the blatant gaslighting irked Matthew. "You must've been so busy you forgot."

"Yeah, you definitely told him," Antonio backed him up and Matthew was annoyed that Antonio went along with it. Gilbert was an asshole for sure and how his friends let it happen was beyond him, especially since Antonio *could* be nice.

Ludwig groaned and rubbed at his face.

"Sorry bro, next time I'll write it down or something so you don't have to stress," Gilbert leaned into the window to pat his brother's hair, which made Ludwig scowl. A fair reaction to having Gilbert push into one's personal space.

"You don't smell like you've been drinking."

Alfred and Antonio made eye contact behind Gilbert's back with an amused face that said 'oh shit' because none of them had *actually* been drinking. They promptly changed their posture and became slightly unbalanced so it looked like they were at least tipsy.

"I'm being responsible!" Definitely not something Gilbert was defined by. "Someone's got to look after them. Are you proud Luddy?"

"Yes, I'm proud," Ludwig's voice was monotone but Gilbert still took it in stride. "I'm going home now so please be quiet when you come back-"

"Of course we will!" Antonio's voice was louder than necessary as he stepped forward and 'crashed' into Gilbert. "You won't even know we left!"

Ludwig's tired and unimpressed eyes fell onto Gilbert, who just grabbed Antonio with a chuckle.

"Yeah yeah, I'll make sure he shuts up. Can't do an awesome job if you haven't had an awesome sleep."

"I've been managing," Ludwig said in resignation. "Just stay together as a group. Don't let anyone wander off and be aware of your surroundings."

"Okay, you got it," Gilbert said. "Is that an order chief?"

"I mean it," Ludwig was serious but there was some concern in his voice. "Okay, well, enjoy your night."

The group waved as Ludwig drove off and as soon as the vehicle was out of sight the laughter that everyone was trying to hold in could no longer be contained.

"That was close call, you must plan to be better next time," Ivan asserted.

"Good idea! Next time we'll have to drink!" Gilbert seemed too excited by the *stupid* idea and to Matthew's surprise, so did Antonio. Matthew would've expected he had some reservations about it but fortunately for him, he didn't seem to be traumatised by liquor. What having friends to drink with did to a guy...

"Hell yeah! But only enough to be tipsy because if we're drunk then we'll probably be targets," Alfred responded. "I'll bring some drinks next time, alright?"

"Drinking would be bad idea, could impair already impaired sensibilities."

"So you're saying you're a lightweight?" Alfred challenged.

"Compared to you, anyone is lightweight."

"Oh har har, you never miss an opportunity to exploit that joke." Alfred rolled his eyes. "I actually think you weigh more than me! How about next time we have a meeting we *check*? Gilbert, you have scales at your place, right?"

"How about we get back to our own awesome patrol *you* stop wasting time," Gilbert snapped, definitely not amused by Ivan. It brought Matthew a little sense of ironic happiness that Gilbert was being exposed to company he couldn't tolerate. Hopefully, Ivan knew this and continued to harass Gilbert.

The group was tense for some time but then recovered back to the light joking before it came to break up for the night. Alfred went home and Matthew snuck in once he was sure his brother was in bed. Matthew slipped through his window into his room and removed the precautionary pillows he stuffed under his blankets before going to sleep.

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More often than not, it was only Alfred and Ivan on the streets. Matthew could tell what Alfred's game plan for the night was just by what clothes he chose to wear when he went out the door with a goodbye. If it was something severely inappropriate for vigilante-ing then it was a clubbing night. But if it was something discreet and bland, it was a solo night.

Matthew would wait a couple moments before slipping out behind him and following from a safe distance. It didn't take long for Matthew to work out their pattern.

The two would periodically check in with each other via text as they covered areas far from each other. Their MO was much more subtle than when in a group. Much more quiet and alert, posing as if they were just walking to get from point A to point B. Alfred almost seemed paranoid, whether that was because he'd been caught vigilante-ing before and didn't have an excuse now, or because he was hoping to face the killer and doing his best to stay alert, Matthew couldn't tell.

But what he could tell was that Alfred had his gun on him. His brother was always reaching his hand behind his back with every suspicious glance down a dark alley... it was easy to assume what he was thinking. Good to know.

Regardless, both twins were avoiding the police and Matthew was surprised at how well Alfred managed to be overlooked. Just another citizen stupidly walking at night, with no ulterior motives and no baseball bat. Just a gun (that Alfred might not be allowed to have *on* him, but what would Matthew know?), hidden out of sight.

It didn't take much stalking at all for Matthew to come up with plans. If he shadowed Alfred on nights he was alone, any nearby area or previous area he'd been through would be ideal to strike. Matthew could get away with a kill before Alfred could even arrive. He might never arrive if he didn't know to look, if Matthew took his victims quickly before they could scream then the body might sit there for a long time before being discovered.

Though he'd only kill ahead of Alfred's route if he wanted his brother to discover the body. Matthew would have to consider how that would impact daylight life, after all. He was still a little sore at his brother and if Matthew wanted to prove he wasn't caught up by the snag that was Alfred, he might have to leave a body and hurt his brother.

But maybe for now he'd refrain from having Alfred personally find more bodies. Daylight life and all. Besides, he knew his brother would take it personally when he learnt about the uptick in murders with markings... it was only a matter of time before *everyone* learnt and that would be enough.

Matthew continued to follow his brother. By following Alfred, Matthew wouldn't even have to worry about Ivan, completely oblivious and too far away to do anything. But it did irk him that everything seemed to revolve around Alfred and this time he didn't even know it!

Because it was so easy he didn't have to wait long to implement his adjusted scheme into his routine, it gave him more opportunities to kill. So whenever Alfred went solo out Matthew was silently trailing behind him from a distance with his eyes peeled and steadily continued to kill a handful every night.

And on the 'clubbing nights'? Either Matthew got his fill of amusement or took the night off to catch up on sleep.

See? It didn't take him long to adapt at all. Nothing could hold him back and he wouldn't be challenged.

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A couple of weeks had passed since Alfred started roaming the streets, again. It was night and Matthew was making dinner, as usual, with the TV on in the background and still no mention of his accomplishments.

Alfred was getting changed into his 'clubbing' attire as he said a minute or so ago after asking Matthew how long dinner would be. Matthew could only assume that was the reason Alfred decided to put his phone on speaker when it rang.

That and complacency, right? Matthew didn't know why Alfred didn't even try to hide anything from Matthew. Was it because Matthew would be 'nice' and not do anything to get in his way? Was it because he didn't see Matthew as a threat? Or did he just forget that Matthew was there? With the ability to hear and digest information?

Would Alfred say it's because he trusts Matthew? Or was there just no thought in it at all, only focused on what came next? Progressing. It was likely that, surely.

The phone conversation was muffled from being so far away and Matthew stepped away from cooking dinner to eavesdrop better.

"-have a meeting tonight instead of going out if it's that much of a big deal," Alfred sounded taken aback with an edge of distress.

"Fuck yeah, we'll need to have a meeting tonight because I don't know if we should keep going out! No that's not awesome - we need to keep going but everyone needs to know."

Intriguingly, Gilbert sounded like a wreck, and Matthew scrambled to interpret what could've happened. Did it have something to do with Antonio, maybe? Matthew was at a loss here and didn't know what to expect.

"Gilbert, fucking what? Know what? We have to keep going out! Just tell me what it is!" Alfred sounded desperately worried.

"Fuck- hold on Alfred, it's so not awesome that I'm panicking like this. If I talk too loud then Lud will hear and I'll be in deep shit but seriously, this is seriously *bad*. The Trail Killer fucker never stopped and apparently *he's* gotten more cocky because there's been *more murders* last week than ever before and Ludwig said the cops *know* it's that Trail Killer *fucker* but they don't want everyone to panic because apparently this guy is carving markings into the bodies because he's rubbing it in the police's faces that they haven't caught this fucker yet and Lud thinks it's only gonna get worse!"

Gilbert's breathing was very audible. Matthew wasn't breathing at all.

"What the *fuck?*" Alfred said after a moment, his voice simmering with restraint.

"Alfred, we have to do something," Gilbert snarled. "I know Ludwig's stressing about it and he's an officer so that means it's *bad*! He says that fucker is *gloating* by marking people and he's just gonna keep doing it-"

The police knew... how long did they know...?

"What the *fuck?!*" Alfred repeated with force. "No. Gilbert. That's so fucked up! You're telling me that this asshole's been *killing* people all this time? I mean still ! Even will all those cops out there-? That didn't scare him off?! I thought we finally had a break and that asshole was just waiting- but you're saying that the police *knew* but didn't tell *anyone?!*"

"Apparently the police purposely told the media nothing!" Gilbert sounded equally as angry. "Ludwig wouldn't say why! There's no way he's happy about it!"

Oh, *Oh,* so *that's why* Matthew hadn't heard a *single thing* about the Trail Killer. He was shocked and offended by this revelation and felt so fucking stupid he hadn't even *considered* it.

This *whole time-!*

"What the fuck?!" Alfred was nearly yelling. "Isn't it the police's job to keep everyone safe?! How can anyone stay *safe* if they don't fucking know that the Killer is still out there and still killing! Why the fuck would the police stay quiet about it!? Shouldn't Ludwig be doing *something* to do- I don't know, *something!?*"

The police were hiding that information from the public. And... they knew it was the Trail Killer all along. Matthew was looking forward to making top headlines but the police kept the media in the dark. They *knew* it was the Trail Killer and they had already verified it! There was no doubt or any reason to wait.

Why won't they give him credit?

"I don't know. Ludwig wouldn't say! I know my little bro is trying everything he can so don't blame him-!"

"They're all fucking assholes! Everyone, the public needs to know! They can't do this! What if more people die because no one was warned that this bastard is killing more and more people!?"

If that was the case (which it *was*), Matthew should be thanking the police but *thankful* wasn't the emotion that was bubbling up inside.

"Whoever's keeping it a secret is the asshole!" Gilbert snapped. "This probably sucks for Ludwig too!"

"Oh, so that makes Ludwig's boss the asshole? If that's the case then that makes him a big one! But if Ludwig still knew about it then that means all the cops know and they're just happy to go along with it! *They're supposed to protect*- ugh! You need to talk to him and tell him everyone needs to know!"

"I did! You think I didn't find this plan so fucking *un*-awesome?! He just said not to worry about and he said it was all under control-"

"Bullshit!" Alfred scoffed. "He's just saying that cus it's his job!"

"He's trying! He probably doesn't think it's awesome either-!"

"Fuck! So is it just us that knows?" Abrupt panicked laughter came from Alfred. "Us and the police?"

Matthew could tell from Alfred's voice he knew the answer yet was pleading against reality that it wasn't true... Alfred's friend group were the only people in the city besides the secretive law enforcement that knew that the Trail Killer was a bigger threat than they gave credit for.

Matthew could feel his face turning into something ugly.

The powers to be wanted to ignore him and deny his existence. It made him really really angry and he hated being ignored. Matthew's thoughts were turbulent as he landed on a solution. He would have to let them know, make them know. He would have to go above and beyond and do something undeniable. Something that would be impossible to keep quiet. Something that *everyone* would notice and the police would never have a chance to keep quiet about.

He just didn't know what or how he was going to pull it off. But that's never stopped him before.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, my laptop wanted to autocorrect 'scheisse' to 'cheese' lol

Also I only just had the idea to shove in this subplot with Gilbert (the part where Matthew doesn't like him) so hopefully, it seems as natural as possible. But don't worry, I'm sure it'll pay off...

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a day later and Matthew was still steaming from the discovery the day before. He didn't let anything leak beyond his facade but he could feel his entire body tensing with the need to do *something* to make his presence known to the whole world.

He was serving up dinner and instead of sitting on the couch, Alfred was pacing while texting. This was now a habit for him. Apparently, Alfred needed to know where all his friends were at every given moment of the day and if they were okay. *Okay*, Alfred wasn't obsessive to the point of microchipping his friends but Matthew definitely noticed an increase in Alfred's screen time. Especially since he and Gilbert started the vigilante group.

It was a pity that Gilbert was too cowardly to hunt for the Trail Killer solo. With a little luck, Gilbert might just find him...

Matthew brought both dinner plates to the couch and was about to open his mouth and tell Alfred to sit when Alfred exclaimed-

"Hell yeah, way to go Gilbert!" Accompanied by a fist pump.

That caught Matthew's intrigue but he couldn't help the scepticism. It could be something he needed to know... Something *helpful*. Or it could be completely irrelevant and just some dumb shit Gilbert was known to pull that for some reason, Alfred backed him up on just because he found it funny and gave his shitty friend a pass.

"What is it?" Matthew asked.

"Oh, nothing. Gilbert just got some good information for something. Don't worry about it," Alfred was buzzing as he lunged for the plate and dug in.

Matthew wanted to be upset that Alfred refused to share anything with him, even when Matthew already knew about his brother's illegal activity. He wasn't even surprised. Just mildly disappointed.

But that half answer was better than nothing. Because now Matthew knew there was something for him to look at on Alfred's phone. He'd just have to get it.

Alfred was almost *never* without his phone and Matthew had to be patient and wait for the right time to strike. When Alfred bid him goodnight as he walked through the door in his best going-out clothes as if he really were going clubbing, Matthew returned the sentiment and stayed home. After stalking the group for so many nights he had an estimate for when Alfred would be home. Matthew set an alarm for that time and went to bed.

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When Matthew's alarm sounded he was quick to turn it off and check if Alfred was home from his location. Seeing that he was, Matthew snuck into his brother's room to swipe his phone. Every move was silent and soft, acutely aware that Alfred might not be deep asleep and if Matthew was caught doing this he'd have no explanation. He'd rather continue to have everyone assume that he was completely trustworthy.

He put in his brother's password as he sat comfortably on the couch and sat his own phone beside him. Instead of creating a traceable paper trail of sending things between phones, Matthew would just take a picture of anything he needed.

Rifling through Alfred's text conversations would certainly be a start and if Matthew was honest, he partially wanted to dig around because of curiosity. And jealousy. Because if Matthew hadn't been Matthew and had been fortunate enough to be born *different*, then maybe he would've had the life Alfred had. Every now and again he was reminded of it and it made him ache just a little.

But mostly he wanted to dig around because he needed information and *Gilbert* was apparently the one to provide it.

Immediately the task seemed more overwhelming than necessary when Alfred and Gilbert's texting history was so... rich. Matthew glared at his brother's phone until he realised that described a lot of Alfred's text conversations and not just Gilbert in particular. The idea seemed so foreign to Matthew that one could text someone so much during the day just because they could.

Because why else would Alfred be texting Gilbert so much? As far as Matthew knew those two weren't *best friends* and just casual friends and Gilbert only popped up because Alfred had to deal with Antonio because Matthew brought Antonio home instead of killing him - oh. How frustrating. It was his fault.

Matthew pushed it aside and began trudging through the texts and from the timestamps, Matthew found exactly what Alfred had been so excited to receive earlier.

Gilbert

its a draft I found lying around. its old apparently from before that fucker started marking people but probably still helpful because Luds awesome like that. hopefully we'll know what kind of loser we're dealing with. also Lud told me theres been 10 more this week so we need another meeting to come up with an awesome strategy

Attached was a photo of a handwritten paper, stained with coffee. Matthew's brow furrowed as he clicked on it and took a picture with his phone before reading.

Trail Killer criminal psychology profile DRAFT

Kirkland was likely the first murder documented to belong to the suspect, alias Trail Killer. The MO of multiple stabs and a slit throat in a blitz-style attack suggest this was an ameture and opportunistic murder. While the suspect brought their own weapon which would suggest organised planning, they didn't have an intended victim. Likely triggered by a personal event of some sort in their own life, the suspect was already pent up and snapped in a violent outburst. The brutality suggests anger and first murder committed. The blitz-style attack that is later repeated against other victims implies the suspected wanted to incapacitate the victims as soon as possible suggesting low self-esteem and an unwillingness to prolong the encounter, signifying that it wasn't personal re-enforced because these victims were ones of opportunity.

Kirkland was too shocked to react in any way, either suggesting this was someone he knew or this was a person one would assume to be incredibly unsuspecting. The suspect is unlikely to fit any macho man archetype in terms of appearance.

Kirkland's body was not moved after death. When analysing that murder as a standalone that could suggest that once the suspect realised what they'd done, they either felt immense regret or were too afraid to potentially incriminate themselves further. However, the existence of the follow-up murders implies the suspect overcame that fear and likely chased the thrill of the first encounter. These additional serial murders imply the suspect has had time to rationalise their actions and investigators would not benefit from using a polygraph on such an individual.

The body not being tampered with or further mutilated suggests no hate or resentment and the thrill was when the victim was alive. This is true for all victims with a consistent MO. The lack of staging after the murder furthers the thrill and attention-seeking aspect, along with the spontaneity of the act and chosen victim. The suspect is also comfortable with the act and finds no remorse afterwards and is not compelled to depersonalise the corpse or make the victim 'comfortable' in any way to make the suspect feel more comfortable with their actions. The suspect desires for these bodies to be found and relishes in public interest in the case.

The suspect would have a written account of the murders of some sort, whether in the form of a diary, artwork, map with markings, etc to relive the thrill. The suspect is likely to closely follow the investigation and similar discussions. How this manifests in this modern age would be hard to anticipate and harder to monitor online landscape, however would certainly encourage social discussions of the crimes in day-to-day life if they can't online. The suspect may be chasing the attention and finding more thrill in that than the act of murder itself.

Since Kirkland's murder, the suspect has evolved to act differently. Bonnefoy had been found far from his last sighting without any signs of struggle. Theories about his voluntary presence in the park is limited to the hypothesis that he was upset about Kirkland's passing, as the man was known to him and Bonnefoy went to the park voluntarily to find the location of Kirkland's death for sentimental reasons. Bonnefoy's blood alcohol level was high, but Bonnefoy's friends stated that he was not known as a 'sad drunk'. Considering other victims were lured away, this tactic may have been adopted earlier by the suspect and employed for Bonnefoy.

If this is a favourable tactic, then the suspect may be charismatic. Only one victim fought back despite grievous injury so the suspect is able to charm potential victims into lowering guard. This is a sign of intelligence and an adapted individual.

Charisma appears to be the favourable tactic as Vargas was lured from his last known location. He was overheard talking with someone, likely the suspect before willingly leaving the location. He had no intrinsic motive to go to the park near where he was killed, suggesting external manipulation potentially by our suspect.

The suspect, while statistically likely to be male, we must consider the possibility that they may be female. While a female would be noticed roaming the streets at night, it would be unlikely that a female suspect would be reported as suspicious due to a public bias against women not being perceived as dangerous. This bias would also aid in luring victims away and dropping their guard. There is no substantial or otherwise evidence for the suspect's gender yet.

The choice of victims places the suspect between 20-30 years old as the victims are in their prime and fit in that age bracket. The knowledge of the area suggests someone in the

immediate area, likely a lifelong local.

Despite the coincidence of the victims being known to one another, the victims appear to be chosen at random due to opportunity. In cases like this, usually the reason is due to an anger or hatred towards society. The suspect finds relief in performing these murders and relishes in the publicity. This feeling of vindication and twisted reverence motivates them. We are looking for an outcast with little to no friends due to a factor they cannot control. This factor is not physical (eg ache scarring, physical disability) due to charisma and confidence.

The suspect will not stop until stopped. They have an insatiable appetite for murder and the thrill compels them to escalate at a staggering rate.

Solutions or ways to make progress:

A media blackout might challenge a media-motivated killer

Wait for suspect to slip up

-too costly could take a while, slip up may not be big enough

-actively create situations to tempt suspect, encouraging slip up

-media blackout to cause desperation?

-increased surveillance for pressure

Focus on mutual friends of the victims and who had the location of each, the killer is smart and likely able to make it look like a crime of opportunity.

-align with method and profile?

Offer information nights to the public to create discussion, watch everyone who attends

Notes TO DO

-Buy more coffee

-Gilbert

-Drink water

-Reply to Feliciano

-TYPE UP DRAFT TONIGHT

-Refine theories

-Find reasoning for or against possibility of woman, need to rule out demographic

-specify any mental illnesses

Alfred

1

fuck 10!!!

and they still wanna keep us in the dark???

2

way to go Gilbert!!!

imma skim it now but then I'll analyse it properly like a real detective later

or we can discuss when we patrol

also we need to scheme to find out everything they aren't telling us and put it together

Gilbert

like detectives! we could get a corkboard and spend all night investigating. lets have a meeting tonight and I'll get Lud to tell me as much as he can before he leaves again then everyone can come over

Alfred

fuck yeah good idea

I'll get the stuff to bring

you interrogate Ludwig

WAIT

i just read some was it HIS idea to not tell anyone anything

hes the main detective right?????

Gilbert

he's just doing what he thinks it right. he knows more than us because he has to deal with criminals all the time! maybe it helped get some information and he's close to solving it!

Alfred

Gilbert that's fucked up

what if people are dying just because they don't know

what if it's his fault that bastard can

if your brother has so much power then can't he just lockdown the city??

Gilbert

because locking down the city is probably really hard. Ludwig is awesome he probably thought to do that and probably has a reason not to do that. what if everyone panics or something? we can't tell him what to do and if we want him to keep telling me stuff you can't say anything to him or he'll get mad that im snitching

Alfred

cus then if that asshole really wants to kill people he will still go out then he'll be caught

he'll be caught if he's the only one going out in lockdown

plus your brother said that the killer wont stop so why is keeping it a secret going to stop him

Matthew could keep scrolling for a while, but Alfred was very much displeased with Ludwig's choice to keep the whole city in the dark and Matthew shared the sentiment with growing aggravation at Gilbert for defending Ludwig. Not that he should even be surprised. If Gilbert didn't see that what his brother was doing was *wrong*, then Gilbert was a fucking idiot too. More than he already was.

Despite Matthew's own personal interest, Alfred was right. As a police officer, Ludwig made the wrong choice. In an effort to hinder the killer that didn't even pay off, he compromised the safety of the entire city. Sure Ludwig thought that more surveillance would suffice, but by now Matthew should've proven him wrong. While Matthew saw the strategic move he had to give Ludwig credit because it turned out Matthew really didn't like that this whole time he *actually* believed that any day now he'd see his work in the news and he was holding on for it. He felt stupid for assuming he knew what the police were thinking.

Plus Ludwig scared him for how he was so easily able to break down Matthew just from the crime scene alone... and this was only a draft. One written *before* Matthew started marking his victims. As

much as he wanted to see the updated version and hear Ludwig's take on *that* because Ludwig was much smarter than he gave credit for, he feared Ludwig might have a clearer image of the killer than Matthew was comfortable with...

But Matthew took a calming breath because he really doubted that no matter how well Ludwig thought he knew the 'Trail Killer' - arguably the 'real Matthew', Ludwig would never connect that real part of him to the Matthew suffocated by a facade he knew how to wear. And he knew how to wear it well. Especially when he had insight into what Ludwig, and now all the police, expected the killer to be.

He was fine and he *will* be fine. All he needed to concern himself with was making a statement so loud that the police couldn't stifle his existence any longer. Something so big that the stress would pay back Ludwig tenfold for what he put Matthew through.

Would killing the *lead investigator's* brother do the trick?

Chapter End Notes

I tried so hard to create something on Canva to represent this profile that Ludwig had written but somehow Canva is just no good for trying to get creative smh. Insert 'graphic design is my passion'!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> There will be major character death this chapter so if you feel like you need a heads up for who it is, scroll to the bottom notes and I'll prepare you for who.
>
> I didn't expect it to be so long but you guys deserve a treat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tonight it was only Alfred and Ivan on the streets and finally, it was time for Matthew to make some noise. Unfortunately, in the time between reading the profile and leaving the house now, Matthew had a lot of time to re-rationalise his plan of killing the lead police detective's brother.

As *gratifying* as killing Gilbert would be, it was also impossible to do so as the Trail Killer... not without changing his MO from 'opportunistic' to 'planned', giving Ludwig a *lot* to learn. Sure, Matthew could just kill Gilbert for the sake of killing without following the regular TK MO so he wouldn't get recognised but if it wasn't claimed by the Trail Killer then it wouldn't leave the message he needed! Even if he knew where Gilbert lived, Antonio was a liability by being there too. Of course, Matthew could kill them both but where they lived was under heavy surveillance, security that would be expected of the lead investigator of the Trail Killer case.

But Matthew was stubborn and considered his options for getting his intended victim *out* of the house if he couldn't go *in*. He considered how he could *lure* Gilbert away and make the case personal for Ludwig while exacting revenge on his bully of a brother. Only there was no way to get only Gilbert out without leaving crumbs that could trail back to his own hand. So Matthew reluctantly gave up.

It just wasn't going to happen. He would have to shove it to the back of his mind and find an alternative.

Matthew followed Alfred with the plan of branching off and staying within a general radius, still unsure of *what exactly* he was going to do when he noticed Alfred seemed to be debating something with himself. Then Alfred slipped his phone out of his pocket and brought it to his ear. He continued to briskly walk with a little more paranoia that suggested this conversation was *sensitive*, catching Matthew's interest.

"Hey-" Alfred whispered, smartly yet annoyingly the phone wasn't on speaker.

Alfred was silent as the other person spoke.

"Yeah yeah, I know but you picked up! So ha!"

Despite not talking, Alfred was just as expressive as ever with his body language as he listened.

"Look- I've just been thinking, scheming if you will-" Alfred was cut off.

"I don't know about bringing it up at our team meeting yet cus I don't think it'll work as a whole group... But I just wanted to run it by you first cus you'll give it to me straight if there's something wrong with this idea. Read: it's fucking stupid but I think it's stupid enough to work so we could make it work-" Alfred was cut off again.

Alfred let his shoulders slump dramatically.

"Okay, geez, we've got all night." He threw his hands up and glanced around a corner before changing streets. "Anyway, I've been thinking-"

"Seriously? What's with this friendly fire? I thought we were on the same wavelength here! The enemy of my enemy and all that!" Alfred reached for something tucked into his back, behind his jacket as he glanced down an alley.

Matthew was certain that Alfred was talking to Ivan, having chosen to *call* because he was about to suggest something important. Matthew followed.

"Common motive! Are you just ragging on me out of reflex or what?"

Occasionally Alfred would say a word too loud and it would echo down the street before he went back to almost whispering.

"Yeah, as I was *saying*, I've been *thinking*, because I'm smort, and I have a scheme to try and lure out this asshole."

"Oh, if my thoughts are so *dumb* and stupid then why do you wanna hear them now? Hmm? Change of attitude much?"

"Okay, *I'll* stay focused," Alfred pretended to pace by a random door as a police car passed. "But you gotta hear out my explanation cus if I just said my idea then you'd probably say something *mean*."

"Yeah, you can be mean, I thought you would've taken that as a compliment. Anyway- this asshole targets people who are alone like we are now... And he goes after drunks so... methinks we should get drunk-!"

Matthew wanted to facepalm. Alfred jerked his phone away from his head.

"By 'get drunk' I just mean look drunk! Seriously, way to prove me right about you not listening because I am so not stupid. But if we stumble around and act drunk then we'll look like *easy* prey when we're *not* and then, we might lure this guy out and we can finally get him!"

Matthew heard his brother's reasoning, but everything about it was just so stupid. Besides, Matthew wasn't going to go after them, regardless of how Alfred 'lured' and made himself a target.

"Come on! Think about it! Why would a killer ever go for you? You're a brick wall! But if you looked vulnerable and easy-"

"Yeah well, I have a gun so it doesn't matter who's stronger," Alfred spat. "Anyway, think about it!"

"Fine, think about it. You don't need to be on board because I can do it and you can do you. A strategy is a strategy so who cares! But don't blame me when you never see nothing cus why would the killer ever approach *you* and everyone else will assume you're a killer."

"Okay, *sorry*. Or as my brother would say, *sooo-ry*."

Alfred laughed and Matthew hit his shoulder against the corner he was waiting around. It felt weird being a joke and left him bitter that Alfred would laugh about him without him even being there. The tightness winding in his stomach panged at being something to mock.

"You know Matthew? Whatever, I brought it up with you first cus it can only be us who does it. It won't work in a group and I don't wanna make the others do it. Cus... y'know. What if it goes right? I'm tough and I know you're tough-"

"I'm just stating it! Don't take it as a compliment."

"So if we really get lured and cornered, the stupid fucking killer will underestimate us then that means we'll really have the upper hand, right? If we *appear* to be drunk then that fucker will think we're vulnerable and can be pushed around but we're *not*. And the killer won't approach us just to kill, well, first, he'd just try and talk to us. So, anyone who talks to us while they think we're drunk and is really weird about it, we know something's up."

This was all because of Ludwig's stupid fucking profile. Now everyone thought they had him *pinned*. Matthew would never be so stupid when choosing targets. He knew what to look for in people.

"Yeah, of course you'd find it satisfying. Anyway, that was my pitch. Just think about it and we'll discuss it later, alright?"

"Yeah okay, I'll let you go now. Stay safe and happy hunting!"

The last part was said ironically as Alfred hung up, leaving Matthew perplexed by the whole interaction. Except not really. This was something his brother would do and Matthew should've known his brother would do *everything* and anything he could to try and 'win'. Matthew had to admit Alfred's idea was a valid strategy even if it would never work because Matthew would be steering clear of the both of them.

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Matthew split off from Alfred. His brother's plan amused him and Matthew could check in later to see how his brother adapted to it but for now, Matthew was on a mission.

He had to find a way to make sure his existence could *not* be ignored or covered up anymore. He needed to do something public and *shocking*. Hopefully, an idea came to him when an opportunity presented itself because he was finding it hard to come up with something that would be big enough to shake the city.

So Matthew walked around with his eyes peeled and ears open while brainstorming.

He could move a body somewhere that, when found would be by a lot of people at once, so the police couldn't possibly shut all of them up. That would get rumours circulating on the internet and then the police would *have* to address them.

But for the body to be found by many at once, it would have to be somewhere incredibly public, which was too risky. It would be worth it if it paid off, but if he slipped up in any way... Matthew

already saw how smart and dedicated the police force was. It wouldn't take long before that one clue left behind came back to haunt him.

Maybe he was just being paranoid. At worst he'd be caught on camera, likely with grainy footage and impossible to make out details. Plus if the police were insistent on keeping the public in the dark, asking people for help would be out of the question.

But if the hypothetical footage wasn't as terrible as expected, being caught on camera would still narrow down a demographic and possibly give more clues than he could know. Sure, it wouldn't be as condemning as leaving DNA, which would tell everything about him with unique precision. It would be more like leaving a puzzle piece that could be used against him. Still not an option.

He just needed to keep his eyes open to find an opportunity and make a loud statement.

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During his brainstorming and pacing of the streets, Matthew realised he had a tail. He didn't make any moves to let his stalker know that *he* knew, but Matthew discreetly kept an eye on the situation.

This was *exactly* what he needed. An idea came to him.

His stalker was a police officer. The same police car with the same licence plate kept circling around the block and popping up in the corner of his eye.

Most members of the force were likely well-informed of the killer's profile which Ludwig had probably since finalised and so the police had an idea of how this killer behaved. Alfred's dumb plan that was in the back of his head popped up as Matthew made a connection. His brother expected the killer to *come up* to him and try to lure him away. The officer was likely expecting the same.

So Matthew wouldn't *approach* the officer.

As naturally as he could he changed his demeanour to make it obvious that he was looking for something or someone. He looked anxiously down every street and moved his mouth as if calling for someone. After all, his stupid, idealistic brother was on these streets and Matthew had every right to be worried because there was a killer out there.

The car that was silently following him went past him again and disappeared around the corner. Matthew kept up the act and held his breath for the car to come back as he mentally went through the steps of his hastily formed plan, smoothing them out when he came to foreseeable bumps so he could do what he needed to do without fail.

He had years and years of practice of thinking about his actions and how he came across that eventually he stopped second-guessing himself and found confidence in the role he was forced to play. He had completed the improvised plan by the time the police car came by and conveniently pulled over in front of him... only for a minor wrench to be thrown in.

Matthew *knew* the officer. He paused and held his breath, not wanting to act first when he didn't know how he should handle this or if he should go about it any differently.

Oh, he'd go through with it. He couldn't ask for a better coincidence.

Ludwig went to talk before clamping his mouth shut and rubbing his face with a groan.

"I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

It would be really easy to just reassure the officer that Matthew could forgive him because he knew how tired Ludwig was, but Matthew didn't want to seem too assertive.

"It's Matthew," he hesitated and looked around. There was no one else.

"Okay, Matthew. Can you tell me what you're doing out at this time?"

Either it was Ludwig's exhaustion or a routine question, but Matthew didn't feel like he was being scrutinised. Good.

"Um, I'm just going for a walk..." He could just say it, but he needed Ludwig to lower his guard first. "Have you seen many people around here?"

"Can't say I have... Why do you ask?"

"Well..." He let his eyes wander as he 'contemplated' something and 'gave in'. "My brother's out here somewhere and I'm worried."

"Alfred..." Ludwig screwed his eyes shut and sighed. "Has he been leaving the house since I spoke to him?"

"Eh- Yes? I just noticed he wasn't home and he didn't say he was going out so I just had to go find him."

"I should've foreseen this. I should've told you that if this ever happened to call the police- have you tried calling him?"

"I did and he didn't pick up. Usually he does, even if he's out with friends."

Ludwig tisked with concern because unlike the public - who he was *lying* to *willingly*, Ludwig knew the streets were dangerous. The officer was very clearly NOT pleased with either Alfred or the situation. Maybe both, because they often went hand in hand.

"I'm going to have to give him more than a verbal warning this time," Ludwig muttered. "I'll search for him, get in the car and off the streets."

Matthew nodded and put his hood up. It wouldn't do any good to leave his hair in a police car. He circled around the front of the car, briefly looking into the dashcam as he came to the passenger side. But instead of getting in, he made to look around as if he heard something while he slipped a glove from his back pocket and put it on the hand that would be furthest from Ludwig. Upon seeing nothing Matthew just shrugged and opened the door with the gloved hand. He sat, doing his best to hide the gloved hand with his body as he used it to shut the door before sitting on that hand.

Part one was a success because Ludwig didn't look twice, already focused on the road as he pulled out and scanned for Alfred. Matthew made a passing suggestion about where Alfred might've gone, leading Ludwig away from where his brother really was. It wouldn't do any good to actually find Alfred. It would ruin everything. Matthew's opportunity would end and he'd find himself in hot water with his brother for the stunt of snitching.

"How often has Alfred gone out at night? For any reason," Ludwig inquired as they drove, but there was an edge of anticipation to his voice.

"Nearly every night," Matthew answered honestly.

"And I assume he's been telling you he's with friends?"

"Yeah, I didn't have any reason to assume otherwise, eh?"

Ludwig hummed suspiciously.

"Do you know who he claims to have been with?

"Uh, I know he's been seeing Ivan a lot, more than before... I know he's gone out with Gilbert and Antonio a lot too... I think it's all Gilbert's idea."

"Does he come home drunk?"

"I'm usually asleep by then. He tends to get home really late so I don't know..."

"Alright. Does he seem hungover at all in the morning? Or any signs that he's been drinking?"

"No, not really."

Ludwig sighed. His gaze was entirely focused on the streets as they drove by slowly. Matthew pulled his arms through his large jacket and discreetly put on a second glove. Ludwig didn't know him, but he knew Ludwig. Only one person here was completely informed of the nature of the other.

Matthew froze when Ludwig used his phone (while driving!) and connected it to the car's screen. In the brief moment that his call history was visible, Matthew caught a glimpse of recent calls. Most of them were Feliciano, some Gilbert and the rest were labelled as various branches of police work.

Ludwig selected to call his brother and Matthew held his breath as it dialled.

Fuck. This could ruin *everything*. Matthew really didn't want to have to adjust his plan! But there was nothing he could do to stop this call *without* being overtly *suspicious*-

Too late, Gilbert picked up.

"Wassssup Lud?" Came Gilbert's voice, "you bored on the job-?"

"Gilbert. Where are you?" Ludwig's voice was short.

"Home, where else?" Gilbert laughed with a sense of confusion, like it was obvious and Ludwig should feel stupid for asking.

"Prove it," Ludwig tested and Gilbert's tone changed.

"What? Bro, you need to chill-"

"How can we prove it?" Came Antonio's voice and Ludwig shook his head as he thought about it.

"Send me your location. The both of you. Do not hang up and stay on this call until I can confirm-"

"Alright alright don't get your-" Gilbert was cut off by Antonio.

"Did something happen tonight Ludwig?"

"No, not yet, but I am now aware that Alfred's been going out at night hunting for an active serial killer. I suspect he's not the only one... we'll be talking when I get home."

From their intake of breath, everyone knew Gilbert and Antonio had been caught and now felt shame.

"That confirms all I need to know. I'll save the lecture until later but I'm sure you can imagine how I feel about this."

"I'm sorry Ludwig," Antonio had the sense to apologise.

"Are we in trouble?" Gilbert asked and Matthew scowled.

"Only if you do anything stupid again. I'll give you a legal warning because you know this is serious and anything after that I'll bring down the force of the law. After what I told you, you *should* know better. You always utilise your age as if it means something but here you are proving that with age doesn't come maturity and what Opa said about you was *right*."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Matthew was staring ahead on the road but hanging onto every single word. This whole time he was worried Ludwig would say something that would implicate Matthew and let others know he was on the scene, but this turned out even better than he could've hoped.

"I expect you to be home when I finish work. I also expect that you do *not* contact Alfred and warn him. He's had his warning in the past and so this time I will have to act accordingly. You do understand that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything happened whether I'm on duty or not."

Awkwardness lingered and Ludwig sighed again, something he often and shook his head as he muttered.

"I said I would save the lecture... have you shared your location?"

A weak chorus of affirmation from the guilty prompted Ludwig to check and breathe out relief when they were actually where they said they were.

"I'm sorry Lud... you were never meant to find out." Gilbert sounded miserable. "I just *had* to-"

"I just think you're sorry that you were *found out*," Ludwig declared with a sharp edge. "I'll talk to you *later."*

He hung up without waiting for a reply and they continued to drive around in silence. Matthew withheld smiling as he thought about that call... Gilbert was suffering and hopefully, it was eating him alive.

But knowing Gilbert, it wouldn't take long until he rationalised away his guilt and responsibility and then would continue to think that he did no wrong. Antonio would probably help him with it too. They'd be sitting there for hours waiting for Ludwig as they convinced themselves they did what they had to and it wasn't that bad. Then they would argue and try and convince Ludwig of

what they convinced themselves. But Matthew had to admit he had respect for Gilbert's younger brother who was able to call Gilbert out on his bullshit so *well*, even if Matthew hated Ludwig.

Matthew sat up taller in his seat and peered out Ludwig's window. They were in a nice, dark area with not much surveillance and he couldn't see any other people or cars.

"I'd call Alfred, but I don't trust him to be truthful. If I don't catch him in the act then I'd just be giving him notice I'm looking for him," Ludwig said. "Do you know if your brother's armed?"

"Eh-?!"

"I'm asking as a friend. Obviously, it's not ideal for a civilian to be roaming with a weapon, but I'd feel better about his foolish decisions if he wasn't completely vulnerable."

"I don't know. He might?" He didn't see the good in informing that Alfred had a gun.

"Is that-? Matthew leaned into Ludwig's space and looked out into the shadows outside. Ludwig moved to look too, his concerned gaze entirely focused on the world outside the car and not the knife being brought to his throat.

If it's any consolation, Ludwig would finally get the rest he so desperately needed.

Matthew took a deep slice in the side of his neck before Ludwig could even blink. Blood was everywhere in only a few seconds and Ludwig slumped in the seat as weariness overtook him.

"But I'm armed." Matthew held the knife in front of the officer, jerking back with adrenaline when a hand shot to grab his. "Surprise! It's me, eh? Are you surprised?"

He knew Ludwig was surprised. Matthew could see it wth how Ludwig's eyes widened and stared with horror.

Energy was bubbling through Matthew's veins. His mouth was frothing as he spat words without screening them.

"Your profile was actually very close. I'm definitely angry and after attention. I just didn't know how much I wanted the attention until you decided to ignore me and keep everyone in the dark. Thanks to *you* I killed so many people and it was *easy*."

The least Matthew could do was satisfy Ludwig's curiosity about who the Trail Killer was, even if it was some sort of morbid prize. Congratulations! You were right! Ludwig didn't know nearly enough about Matthew, but somehow Ludwig knew more than anyone else.

Ludwig moved his hands down south, towards his belt and many accessories. Matthew used the knife to stop him from reaching for his gun. Ludwig was fading fast and didn't have the strength to resist yet was stopping at nothing to try and do *something* despite not having long left. He kept trying to reach for Matthew and when he couldn't reach his gun he tried to press a button on his radio which Matthew only just stopped in time.

Eventually, Ludwig's limbs slumped but he was by no means out. Matthew could feel the *high* of the kill *rush* through him and he gave into the craving to be *cruel*. To get Ludwig back and make him *hurt*, like how Matthew had been *hurt*. He knew *just* what button to press.

Matthew lived for this! He breathed for this! Electricity sparked through him.

"I was going to kill Gilbert. You know he deserves it, eh? He's a bully."

A distraught look crossed Ludwig's face and it urged Matthew on. *Go big*, make an impact, finally take out the rage that had been burning him for so fucking long.

"I'm still going to kill him. I'm going to hunt him down and he'll never see me coming. You won't be able to stop me. I'll make it slow and tell him that I killed you too. He's going to feel so guilty because that call was the last time you spoke to him and you were right and he was *wrong* and now that you're dead he can't call you *wrong*. He's going to hate himself *so* much like he deserves."

Matthew's hand flew to the side as he jabbed the knife into the car's screen to punctuate his point. This feeling of total control overwhelmed him in the best way possible and he was on top of the world, energised by pure ecstasy.

Ludwig's eyes were still fixed on him when Matthew marked his forehead, too far gone to even flinch in pain but determined to resist. Matthew didn't have anything to say, his heart was racing and his chest was heaving with vigour as he cut the body cam from Ludwig's uniform and held it up for the officer to see with his own pained eyes.

"You're going to die and it will mean nothing."

Finally, he was seen. Angry eyes burned into his and continued to bore into him even past the moment the lights went out, leaving only a haunted husk of regret. It had been a while since Matthew was able to enjoy sticking around to watch someone die. It made him feel powerful and only those with power were respected. If he couldn't have social power as Matthew then at least he could have this. Take this.

Most of his taunting words said with a spontaneous tongue were empty but Ludwig didn't know that. Matthew had no intentions of killing Gilbert now. In fact, he needed Gilbert *alive*. One good thing about Alfred being so close to him was that when this all came to light, Matthew would get to see just how Gilbert felt about it. He would get to see his *suffering*.

Matthew couldn't keep an amused look off his face as he sat back and glanced around the car. When his eyes landed back on the officer's gear he was hit with inspiration. He took the police radio and reached for the gun. After fixing both to his person, he took the dashcam too. Both the dashcam and bodycam would need to be destroyed, no doubt about it. He reached into his back pocket and took a cleaning wipe which he used to brush down his seat and anything he touched, just in case. Before he left the car, another idea hit him. A *great* idea.

He tried to tell himself he enjoyed the act the most, but he knew he enjoyed the fame and fear more. He did love the act and the vindication it brought, but thinking about the aftermath kept him just as intrigued. Fame gave him power. Ludwig wasn't wrong in his assertion after all - the only thing he got wrong was thinking that keeping the Trail Killer's name out of the media would stop him. Kind of contradictory when Ludwig also acknowledged the Trail Killer would never stop.

Ludwig had put the car in park when Matthew pointed, so he leaned over and put it into drive. The car started to drive. Matthew turned his jacket inside out to hide the blood and then left the scene. He'd find out where the car ended up later...

The radio was silent now but he couldn't wait for it to suddenly come to life and tell him *anything*. His heart was hammering and it felt like he had the whole world at his fingertips tonight!

But think, Matthew can't slip up now. He'd have to dispose of the radio before he returned home. The gun too. He'd best use the gun completely tonight instead of saving it. Holding onto critical evidence would just be stupid. Plus using it would make a big splash, especially with everything coming together in one night.

He ducked into a dark alley and examined the gun. The bullets it was loaded with were all he had, so he had to make it count.

Of course, he could just keep walking around until an opportunity came up, but with the confidence that a gun brought, Matthew already had someone in mind.

Now he understood what Alfred saw in guns.

Speaking of Alfred, Matthew tried to think where he would be. By now he basically had his brother's patrols memorised and could make an educated guess for where he *would* be.

So Matthew went in the opposite direction. Let's see how Ivan faced up against a bullet.

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Every time the radio crackled and updates came through Matthew paused prowling and held his breath. He'd get disappointed when it was just random discussions like asking for locations or civilian activity but then when *the* call came in...

It didn't take long but with Matthew's anticipation, it didn't come soon enough.

The radio caught Matthew's attention as a voice listed a variety of codes. It wasn't the codes that stood out, but the forceful tone of the speaker.
Then:

"We've got an officer down! A police cruiser has crashed into the grocery store off the southern highway."

"Backup's on the way," a new voice announced.

"Are there any other vehicles involved?" Another voice joined in.

"Just the one," the original voice declared. "I'm approaching the scene now."

"Do we have an identity?"

"Oh shit-"

"The identity?"

"It's Beilschmidt."

There was an intake of breath.

"I knew he was stressed but this is a dark turn." Another voice muttered.

"Signs of life?"

"...Negative. He's slumped over the wheel, the airbag didn't deploy... this is likely a low-speed collision..."

"Did he fall asleep behind the wheel?"

"No... there's blood everywhere but none of the windows- hold on."

"There's more?"

"What is-?"

"*Oh fuck*- it's the Trail Killer-!"

"*What?!*"

"Are you sure?! Is there anyone else on the scene?!"

"Always creating an opportunity... that asshole is just getting worse. I'm heading there now."

"Throat slit from the side- from- Fuck, from *inside* the car. There's blood everywhere and he's been marked. I don't see anyone around but the killer could be hiding anywhere!"

"This son of a gun's gotten too ballsy. I'm en route too," someone new grunted. There were more people on the channel than Matthew could keep track of and it only continued to grow.

"I'll alert the station- wait, please tell me there's something we could use as evidence in the car."

"Let me check. Ah-! The body cam's gone!"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"And the dash cam's gone too!"

A painful groan came over the radio.

"How the fuck did this dickhead do it?"

"We'll give the car to forensics and see what they can find. A story will come out somehow and we'll work from there."

"If they can find anything, this bastard's thought of it all and was able to kill fucking Beilschmidt. Out of all the officers- Fuck, I don't want to be the one who tells the Chief about this."

There was silence on the radio.

"We'll follow the procedure as normal and hope we find *something. Anything* would be a lead at this point."

"If we don't find anything I'm *finally* putting my resignation in."

"I'll drink to that."

"Oh harden up! Now more than ever we need to catch this asshole and make him *pay*."

"Haven't we been trying to do that since he appeared?"

"Think positive!"

"I'm *positive* we're in for a long night. I can already feel a headache coming on."

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There were a few other updates on the Ludwig situation, but it was all a little anticlimactic after the discovery. It was all just technical stuff like closing off the area and who to bring in and out. Or it was just directing more officers to that area and closing it off. Boring, but Matthew could definitely hear the fear he caused.

Now he was long out of that area and concerned with finding Ivan. But with only a handful of bullets, he knew he didn't have to reserve them *all* for his target... even if Matthew would really like to pump Ivan full of lead...

There were a few unlucky people out tonight. Matthew used a bullet to take someone off guard short range before rushing them and finishing them with the knife. He added his signature and was on his way.

It wasn't about *killing* them with the gun, it was about just using it and sending a message.

The police discovering those bodies on the radio was a treat to listen to.

A code would be listed frantically along with the location. At first, the officers listening in sounded professional as finding a body from a serial killer was quite routine by now, but then things took a turn when they realised that once again, Matthew *escalated*.

"We have a victim! It's the Trail Killer."

"Christ, when it rains it pours."

"We should've expected that sicko tonight after the stunt he pulled."

"How many is that tonight now?"

"The victim has a cut to the neck and the signature marking... but I'm also seeing a bullet wound in the chest."

"Hold up, the victim's been shot? Since when did that bastard have a gun?"

"We'll do forensics on the bullet and find out just what gun he's using. Maybe we can narrow things down from there."

Good, they should. Should be easy maths with Ludwig's gun gone.

"This city is getting bleaker by the day."

"Tell me about it."

"But a bullet? What if this killer has a partner?"

"Yeah, we can't assume he's pulling the trigger."

"What's with this optimism?"

"We just can't rule out the possibility."

"I think he's just playing with us. Fuckers like him feed off fear and he's letting us know he has a gun!"

"Yeah, I agree with that. A gun is so much worse than a knife. Using it is a choice."

"Just when you think you know a guy he pivots."

"Can we just clear this frequency so if something else comes up it can come through?"

"Chances are this is only the first and we're looking for many more to come. It's all or nothing with this guy. Either nothing happens or we get multiple in a night."

"Our resources are on standby for an active night so everyone better be mentally prepared."

"No one's ever prepared."

"We need to come off this frequency-"

"Roger that."

"Backup's on the way to deal with the body. Let's just start the process and see what comes from it before we make any assumptions."

"Leave the assumptions to Beilschmidt. He'll come up with something super specific to add to that criminal profile. Hopefully, this idiot's just handed us something to help us corner him in more."

"..."

"-Did you just clock on?"

"-Did you only just put batteries in your radio *just* now?"

"-Have you been living under a rock?!"

"-Where the *fuck* have you been-?! Christ what a nightmare."

"-I think I'm going to use some P-T-O tomorrow because how are you not aware of the shitstorm coming our way?!"

"I second that, I'm gonna call in sick tomorrow because holy hell as if I can keep up with the shit we're about to be put through-"

"What? What happened?"

"..."

"Beilschmidt... he's been pronounced dead."

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It didn't take long before Matthew had wandered around half the city and had one bullet left... but still hadn't seen Ivan.

There was no way to bait Ivan out and Matthew was running out of time. He needed to make a choice. Use the bullet or save it in the hopes that he would find Ivan later.

But he didn't want to waste more time. Maybe he could get another gun in the future... though it might not be so easy after the stunts pulled tonight. It would certainly force the police to change tactics. Only time could tell and Matthew was more than ready to skip to the morning and see what became of this eventful night.

Now just to spend that last bullet...

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Matthew needed to go out with a bang. When he couldn't find Ivan he knew he had to find something better. And bigger was always better. When he saw the opportunity he just *had* to take it.

Just off a major highway, tucked away enough that Matthew knew he was safe enough to go through with it - was a service station. Being so late at night there were only a few cars parked with the sole intent of pumping gas and getting out of there.

Unnoticed in the shadows and tucked in a blind spot, Matthew readied the gun and aimed. He breathed out as he locked onto his target. Fired.

He could feel the heat of the explosion even from his safe distance as a swell of triumph danced through him like the furiously bright flames consuming the wreck.

He had to move fast now. He ran forward until he couldn't take the heat and threw the gun as far as he could into the epicentre of the disaster. Then with the promise of catching attention and the sound of cars approaching in the distance, he bolted.

The Trail Killer didn't need to leave his signature. The same bullets were used on all his other victims tonight, now tethering his presence to this scene.

Matthew would like to see how the police would try to cover up the Trail Killer now!

He caught his breath once he was far enough away and held onto the radio with anticipation. The reaction didn't disappoint.

Just like the gas station, the radio exploded into chaos as codes were being frantically listed, voices began to overlap with each other and it became near impossible to pick out anything from the constant noise. After a moment it became more coherent.

"*Shit*, what the *fuck* was that-"

"Off the eastern expressway-"

"I'm on the scene, requesting backup going to investigate now."

"An explosion-"

"52 calls in the last minute-"

"Ambulances and firetrucks are on the way now-

"ETA five-"

"What the fuck-"

"Nearby buildings were caught in the blast and need evacuation."

"We need to be professional-!"

"I can visually confirm there have been casualties-"

"Clear the frequency if you're not available! If you're on another scene focus on your work!"

"I'm eight blocks away and I could see it as clear as day-"

"I'm en route, what do we know-?"

"Explosion at a gas station, coordinates sent to all nearby cruisers-"

"Cruiser 17, ETA two minutes-"

"Tonight of all nights-"

"We're gonna need a roadblock *pronto*-"

"What the hell is happening to this city-?"

"All nearby available units are en route."

"The station is overwhelmed-"

"This is cruiser 4 I'll pick up roadblock supplies estimated time fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?! Isn't there anyone closer?"

"*No*, because we've had *four* serial killer victims in the last *hour* and police are combing those neighbourhoods for the killer-"

"Everyone be prepared to put in your overtime. Tonight is a fucking shitshow."

"I have hoards of civilians approaching the scene I need crowd control-"

"Cruiser 24, ETA three, hold your ground."

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It was the end of the night and finally having worked all the anger out of his system, Matthew had to clean up all the loose ends.

He took the memory cards from the cams before using a rock to destroy the cameras. He threw the cams into the most convenient body of water he could find. As for the memory cards, he used a

rock to break them too and when he walked past a dumpster he reached in and found a hot dog wrapper to wrap them in. With the cams and cards separated, even if one is found Matthew was safe.

Too bad Matthew was fond of the radio. He knew he had to throw it out but he weighed up his options.

He could throw it out because storing it at the house was out of the question... or he could hide it somewhere to continue using it. It was risky, but with the advantage it gave him and the entertainment, it was a worthwhile risk.

Before going home, Matthew headed for the woods behind his house to find a place to hide the radio. Even in the early hours, the police channel was still very active as the carnage of tonight seemed to never end and the police struggled to keep everything under control.

Chapter End Notes

RIP Ludwig.

I hope this chapter was nice and shocking for you all :) It's too bad I know what happens otherwise I'd like to shock myself too. I've been over it 171 times at least so I'm kinda nervous.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The light of the day creeping into Matthew's room was unwelcome as it pulled him from his restful sleep, but as the events of the night before suddenly burst into his mind he was wide awake and jumping out of bed with renewed vigour. It had been a tiring night and he could feel it physically weighing down on him but his mind was as sharp as ever, picking up right where he had left off. He wanted *all* the details of what had become of last night, of what he had done.

Matthew left the TV on as he made breakfast, finding it much easier to passively listen as he worked rather than attempt to scroll on his phone while cooking. Being an occasion worth celebrating Matthew started to make pancakes when the news finally came on and caught his attention. He stepped away from the pan and clasped his hands together as the news presenter went through the usual morning greetings before diving headfirst into the top story-

"An explosion last night caught the attention of many pedestrians and motorists alike on the eastern expressway, a gas station is said to have gone up in flames taking many casualties, numbers of which are yet to be confirmed. Police say an investigation is underway however cannot say much at this time, though they are treating the cause of the explosion as suspicious."

Footage of the explosion was shown from vehicle dash cams that were on the expressway, but nothing had caught it front on, just as Matthew expected. Though it still looked harrowing in the shaky and grainy footage the news had collected and made him feel proud as the footage caught people gasping and swearing in the cars. That was the impact he made.

They hadn't made the connection yet, if so far the incident was only labelled as 'suspicious'... he couldn't wait until they had everything figured out.

Matthew watched as many people were interviewed, all claiming to have seen it from a different distance with different comments. Some said it was like daylight and others said it was like a big bonfire. Some said the blast shook the ground, taking out some windows and waking up nearby residents. It certainly didn't go unnoticed.

Matthew waited with bated breath for the next news story, wondering what it could be and if this was enough to finally claim his title and beat those trying to keep him down-

Nope, that was it. That was the only story they had, or at least the only one apparently worth showing. An offhand comment from the newscaster implied that there was nothing else to talk about except for this and he shouldn't expect anything else during the program.

He dug his nails into his palms as he scowled at the TV and only noticed the pancakes were burning when the smoke alarm kindly told him so. Matthew gritted his teeth in frustration as he took the pan off the stovetop and quickly found a chair to step on and turn off the ceiling alarm. He might've ripped the batteries out with more force than needed but the alarm was grating and echoing through him painfully.

Matthew should've fucking known. He should've *expected* that it would be *played* like this. From now on he'd have to take care to think about what his enemies would do, how they would act in

response to his actions - because the explosion was the *only* thing on the news and Matthew had been the one to hand that story to them. It was the *perfect* thing to distract the public from the Trail Killer! By going overboard in an effort to be seen he gave them the perfect diversion.

Matthew wanted to slap himself.

They knew he did it, didn't they? They knew the Trail Killer caused the explosion. But they weren't going to say that, they weren't going to say *anything* because for some stupid reason, the police and the media thought it was for the best. *Insisted* that it was for the best despite it really not being.

He stepped down from the chair and slapped the batteries down on the counter just in time for Alfred to come in.

"What the fuck was that?" Alfred's voice was groggy as he stumbled in. "Wait, do I smell something burning-"

"*Sorry*, I got distracted," Matthew hastily explained because he didn't want to do any back and forth right now. The air in the room still felt thick so he began opening the windows.

Luckily Alfred decided his eyes worked today and instead of being an obnoxious pest, he investigated for himself without drilling Matthew about something that was clearly obvious.

"I'll still eat that, looks crunchy," Alfred said as he analysed the pan.

"It's all yours." Matthew scraped the 'crunchy' pancake onto the pile he made so far and gave it to Alfred before turning the stove off. He was silent as he packed everything away and the TV was still playing in the background. Obviously, it caught Alfred's attention.

"Woah, what the fuck happened?" Alfred asked through a mouthful of pancake and grabbed the remote to turn the TV up. "Shit, that footage's kinda epic though."

Matthew turned to see the news was still talking about the explosion. Alfred misread the meaning behind the double-checking and got defensive.

"What? Explosions are cool, besides if it happened late at night then- oh nevermind, people died." Alfred's tone was more respectful when he sat on the couch. "And apparently it's suspicious. What does that even mean? That it wasn't an accident, right? Do gas stations usually blow up? By accident? Cus I would've just thought that someone did that or that is some kinda faulty thing. Y'know, that it's always suspicious."

Matthew wished the police hadn't decided on another cover-up because he would've loved to see Alfred's reaction to the new status quo. To realise that there was something bigger than him that he couldn't even attempt to compete with. Matthew couldn't just settle on *just* the police knowing.

Alfred pulled out his phone and began muttering.

"Guess I'll have to see what's happening myself, can't trust the police or media anyway."

Matthew let Alfred talk to himself and browsed his options for breakfast since he wasn't having pancakes now. He wasn't really hungry now but he still found himself looking. What for, he didn't know. He didn't want to cook anything so it would just have to be something he could just grab.

"When are they gonna tell the fucking truth?" Alfred muttered with vigour before raising his tone. "Also Matthew, I was right to worry about you when you went out that one time. Apparently, Ludwig thought it was a good idea to keep the whole serial killer thing on the down low and there's been so many more murders! So the media is lying to everyone so people like you think it's safe when it's not because that Trail Fucker is getting bold and no one even knows!"

"Really?" Matthew feigned concern. "Can they do that, eh? Cover it up?"

"Looks like it! And it's not even working so when it all comes out who's gonna trust the cops? Ludwig should've thought of that before he tried to play cat and mouse with his psychology shit that he doesn't even know about because what does he know!?"

Matthew verbally agreed with his brother, keeping the knowing anticipation from his tone. Even if the police and media kept it from the public and kept Officer Ludwig Beilschmidt's death hush-hush, it would still blow up personal lives. How would they keep Ludwig's death from his own brother? Surely Gilbert would notice after a couple of days when Ludwig doesn't come home *at all*. Surely then. Matthew doubted it shouldn't take longer than a week before even someone as thick as Gilbert pulled his head out of his self-centered ass to notice that someone was missing. When that happened, Matthew knew enough about Gilbert's lung capacity to know that there was no way he'd stay silent about it. Once Alfred knew, then Matthew would know.

Matthew couldn't wait to see the results. It was the only thing left to find out about now since the news and media weren't going to give him what he so desperately wanted. But surely Gilbert's reaction would make up for it all.

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It was lunchtime and Matthew wasn't the one to turn the TV on, Alfred was. If only because he thought the explosion was cool yet serious and since his nosy ass couldn't get in contact with his friends to entertain himself in any other way. If it weren't for Alfred, Matthew would've still been cleaning the already spotless kitchen with the same repetitive movements for hours with the same bitter expression.

Matthew initially hardened his expression when Alfred turned the TV on because Matthew wanted nothing more than to be left alone in silence. But then an alarmed choked noise came from his twin and that broke Matthew from his stupor. Without asking he knew the TV was the reason for his brother's distress and Matthew darted over to see the Chief of Police, standing on a podium with an infuriated expression, surrounded by press. The banner at the bottom of the screen read 'Police speak out against Trail Killer.'

Matthew did it. He did it... they were going to acknowledge him. This was it!

"Are they serious? They're actually gonna fucking do it?" Alfred jammed his finger into the remote to turn the volume up. "Fucking *finally*."

The Chief's sharp eyes glanced from his paper and directly into the lens of the camera.

"It is in everyone's best interest to inform the public that the serial killer known as 'The Trail Killer' is very much active and escalated to a horrific scale last night, of which we've never seen before.

"Last night was a tragedy that'll plague this city for years to come. The events that took place were senseless and this barbaric pattern of continued serial and mass murder is unacceptable in

functioning society. So many lives have been impacted and wounds have been needlessly and cruelly created by a lowlife criminal who has nothing better to do than chase attention.

"Our utmost priority right now is bringing a certain sickening individual to justice. The police will not rest until this criminal, the 'Trail Killer' has been brought to justice. It is in the public's interest to disclose the severity and entirety of the Trail Killer's crimes-"

"It's about time they fucking told the truth!" Alfred all but unleashed at the screen. "Why the fuck *now*? SO many people died when they kept it hidden, why won't they talk about that-"

"We have reason to believe the Trail Killer is the cause of the explosion-"

"*What?!*" Alfred was on the edge of the couch. "How the- *Why the*-? Fuck! That asshole's going *crazy*-!"

"Evidence found at the scene has been linked to last night's victims, one of which was a police officer-"

"What the fuck?" Alfred's voice was climbing, his hands balled the fabric of his pants as he had to restrain himself from swinging his arms about and leaned forward, desperate to hear more.

"An attack on an officer of the law is unacceptable-"

"What the *fuck* did I miss last night! I was out and didn't see shit! I heard shit in the distance but what the fuck? *A cop?!* This killer's *insane*! *Who*-"

The screen changed and instead of showing the press conference-

"*OH MY GOD*- NO-"

Ludwig's face was on the screen in memoriam.

Matthew, the Trail Killer had won.

Alfred was barely breathing and didn't notice when he dropped the remote, it clattered on the floor and the batteries rolled out. He brought that hand to his mouth and clamped down on his face as if it would hold his shock.

"Last night, Officer Beilschmidt had unknowingly come into contact with this cowardly killer and was mercilessly murdered with his guard down," the Chief's voice was full of rage as he recounted, before turning back to his notes. "He was a man who only wanted to serve the community and help maintain peace in these trying times. He was a man of dedication and determination and as the lead detective assigned to the Trail Killer's case, worked himself to the bone investigating every possible lead-"

Matthew could feel a fire in his eyes as he held onto every single word. He couldn't look away from the TV. This was big. This was escalating. He caused this all and it was *exciting*.

The Chief moved on from his brief eulogy before moving on to the expected promises.

"We promise it is only a matter of time before the Trail Killer is arrested and when that moment comes, in the face of overwhelming evidence the criminal will be swiftly processed and removed from the streets *permanently*. We have a team of the best detectives in the country working

tirelessly on this case and nothing will prevent these fine men and women from hunting down and putting an end to this delusional maniac lashing out at undeserving, completely innocent members of society."

The Chief of Police radiated furious anger as he continued to make threats and promises of bringing the Trail Killer to justice. It set Matthew's heart alight with every sense of burning satisfaction he had expected from this moment. The words should be cutting him down and perhaps they would've, once upon a time, but now it only urged him on. It was addictive. This was all one big addiction that only made him wonder how far he could take it, toeing the line and pushing boundaries while never overstepping or sticking his neck out too far...

When he first started, he never imagined things would snowball to this size.

"Furthermore a memorial where Officer Beilschmidt was *murdered* will be erected, along with names of all the known victims to be displayed at the same location. The public can pay their respects and mourn the loss of innocent human lives, cut down too soon in the name of unwarranted bloodshed."

And all the credit went to the Trail Killer. Everyone was *warned*. Matthew couldn't have asked for a better outcome. For the Chief of Police to be speaking out, Matthew couldn't possibly get any more publicity.

Alfred kept pulling at his hair and tapping his shoes on the ground as he couldn't tear his eyes away but couldn't sit still, his mouth moving without words, saying 'no' as if he couldn't believe it.

"As it is our top priority to give this our full attention, measures will be put in place to prevent further loss of life and further the investigation. With that in mind, we are enacting a curfew, effective immediately until further notice. From 6pm to 6am, no one will enter the CBD, this is extended to 9pm to 6am in surrounding suburbs. We must insist that for the first week there will be no exceptions; except of course only for emergency crews. All businesses in affected areas are expected to be closed at the applicable time. Should the trial be successful exceptions will expand to include necessary businesses, provided employees have written notes of permission and purpose for travel provided by employers. Conditions of curfew will be revised weekly and reflected upon with the city's safety in consideration.

"A strong police presence will monitor these conditions to ensure the safety of the city. This curfew, again, is non-negotiable and currently has no foreseeable end. We urge compliance and understand if this disrupts lives. Keep in mind this is a necessary caution that must be taken to combat the depraved individual threatening to disrupt the stability of the city and showing a worrying escalation of disgustingly immoral behaviour. We will not allow for an opportunity to lose another life in this criminal's game."

The news presenter looked as professional as usual, even with the added expectation of mimicking the expected emotions and pulling an upset face - just in case some idiot watching the news needed to be told just how serious this was.

"Thank you Chief Beilschmidt. We'll be following this unnerving development closely. We would like to urge our viewers not to panic and to comply with police orders. Curfew is in effect tonight, learn more on our Facebook page or the police website-"

Matthew brought the article up as the news finally went to the traffic conditions - which were naturally affected by the events of last night, just seeing the full impact he made was the cherry on

top of everything. Meanwhile, Alfred was pacing himself into the ground, almost running at the speed he was walking at, desperately saying 'NO' and almost dropping his phone as his fingers jammed on the screen. He brought the phone to his ear but ripped it away after a moment just to try again, and again, and again, with increasing frustration when whoever he was trying to call didn't pick up. Finally, Alfred gasped as he pulled the phone away after another failed call. He violently shoved the phone into his pocket before running to his room.

He soon came out with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder and keys in hand.

"Where are you going?" Matthew quickly asked.

"To Gilberts!" Alfred's voice was hasty as he darted past and was already out of the door by the time Matthew asked-

"When are you coming back?"

All Matthew heard was the sound of the door swinging shut after the car had pulled from the driveway.

Matthew supposed Alfred wouldn't know the answer anyway, being completely focused on his friends. Matthew picked up the remote and batteries before setting it down on the table where it belonged. Memories came back to him of years wasted cleaning up other people's messes and picking up after others like some obedient trained dog. The thought frustrated him and he let his face twist into a sneer before dropping it just as quickly and slumping on the couch.

He did anticipate this though - that Alfred would take off. Anyone would want to check in on their friend if their brother was murdered. Matthew knew this time Alfred wasn't being completely unreasonable, though it remained to be seen if that would *stay* the case. If Alfred's gone for weeks without even touching base at home or updating Matthew... would he really be surprised? Time and time again proved that Matthew just wasn't worth enough and he could never compete. He should give up on expecting Alfred to come back.

He didn't need or want to be upset about that. Not after such a great night. Too bad he couldn't go with Alfred and see the personal aftermath himself... Matthew could only picture what Gilbert was going through right now...

Matthew didn't even *know* if *Gilbert knew*. He could only assume that Gilbert *had* to know. That if he hadn't been informed somehow yet, that he'd *have* to know now when it was broadcasted out to the entire nation.

And with the entire nation aware of the situation and the events that had taken place last night, Matthew could only imagine the uproar happening on the internet. With energized vigour and the opportunity of a silent house, he entertained himself with the internet. He pulled out his phone and it didn't take long before he saw results. Everyone was collectively losing their shit and the Trail Killer was in the primelight, bigger than ever before. Forums were flooded with discourse and Matthew couldn't wait to sift through them all.

Chapter End Notes

sheesh 20 chapters in and I don't really have an end in sight yet. I've got at least 1 major thing I want to do before I'm out of ideas and might wrap up that of course that might be subject to change if I have more evil ideas

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After so much scrolling, Matthew couldn't keep his eyes burning anymore and reluctantly put the phone down as he scrubbed at his face. That only made it worse as it felt like strings of spicy cobwebs were strung between his eyes and the haze of his screen was burnt into his retinas. So to have a break from the internet's reaction, Matthew decided that he might as well go out. He was sure the household needed some things and what better place to go shopping than the store he sent Ludwig crashing into? Shopping would certainly give him a reason to be there and give him a cover to be nosy.

It was a nice day to walk and Matthew had to stifle the bounce in his step. He doubted the memorial wouldn't even be mapped out yet but there was no way everything was cleaned up from last night. He wanted to see the aftermath. He also doubted the police would shut down the whole store so he would have a chance to grab a newspaper from there, the actual site... somehow that made it feel more special.

During the walk, he could see everything he needed to gather just how people felt from the breaking news. He could tell there was a lingering worry seeping into the people of the city, a worry that was validated by no shortage of media coverage. Nearly everyone was on their phones as they walked around and from brief stolen glances, Matthew could see *exactly* what had their attention.

It was all him. It filled him with pride. He did this and people had noticed. They couldn't not notice.

Of course, there were a few outlier reactions, unsurprisingly some of the people his age and younger were taking the whole thing in stride, completely out of touch with the situation. It was people like that who Matthew imagined kept up the hype online because living through an event like this was just *cool* to them. Matthew couldn't blame them for their attitude. Though others did and sent them foul looks for talking about it without sensitivity in public.

But those who were amazed they were *right*. This was cool. That's why Matthew loved seeing the reception online. This was a *defining moment* for the city and will definitely be remembered for decades to come. If anything it made him stand taller and feel more accomplished. He was living through a defining moment. Matthew, the 'Trail Killer', would be recorded in *history*.

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The parking lot of the store was a complete mess, the scene was overwhelmingly clustered instead of cleared out. Which was preferable of course because Matthew would really be disappointed if everything was just scraped clean the next day. He supposed it meant the police were being thorough. Matthew just hoped he was more thorough.

There were giant partitions so he didn't know if Ludwig's cruiser was still there and Matthew definitely wasn't going to ask any of the many officials standing around. Police and other government cars were everywhere and there was tape and signs wherever he looked. The parking lot had been converted into a maze with all sorts of crime scene decorations tracking every

movement the car took as it rolled in. Cones and signs marked every inch of tyre print and speck of shattered glass from the tall storefront windows.

Some officers were leaning on the wall by the store door with heavy bags under their eyes as they drank heavy-duty coffee drinks likely purchased inside. They must be on call because every now and then their radios buzzed with codes and a flurry of words but they ignored it all. Matthew wondered if they had been active last night when all the action took place or if they had woken up to it.

Fortunately, the store was still open, even if there were more people outside staring with their phones pointed at the activity rather than shop.
Inside the store, all he could hear amongst the chatter was about last night, the curfew, or the scene outside. All *him*.

"I'm an introvert so it won't even affect me," someone said while browsing. "I stay inside anyway."

"I just hope it'll be enough," another voice replied.

Matthew grabbed a basket and filled it with some items. If he only walked out with a newspaper, that could look suspicious. Well, it wouldn't look suspicious on its own, plenty of people did that. But Matthew was quite aware of the large police presence outside and he didn't get this far being careless.

"Oh, I heard sirens *all night*. But they were only in the background until I heard one right by my window! Did I tell you that someone got *slashed? Right by my apartment*? I got out of bed when I heard shit happening in the alley under my window and it was the police and some dead guy." Someone said into their phone, sounding both excited and scared. "I thought it was just a gang shooting or something at first cus I swear I heard a gun but now I think it might've been the *Trail Killer*."

The newspaper stand was near the line to pay and Matthew could hear a tired cashier speaking with a customer, an annoying one by the sounds of it.

"-if it's okay to ask?"

"It's fine, sure, it was on the news-"

"Well, I don't like being dependent on technology, unlike your generation-" the customer went off on a tirade that Matthew tuned out, feeling sorry for the cashier who couldn't.

He considered himself lucky there were still newspapers to buy and picked one off the nearly empty pile but stopped as his fingers touched the headline.

He was reminded of the profile. Ludwig said the killer would keep a written record... and Matthew found himself surprised by how well the officer had him pinned.

"-so that's all I know but I really don't know much."

Oh, Matthew had been distracted and missed the cashier's run down of last night's events. Not that it mattered, it wasn't anything he didn't know anyway.

"But do you know anything else?" The next customer in line butted in.

"No, the police can't say anything to us because it's 'confidential' so I really don't know more than you do or could do if you googled it. All they did was take the footage from us but that doesn't tell us anything so buy a newspaper if you're really interested. I think there's some left if not we actually ordered some more to come in this evening."

He knew they wouldn't find anything from the footage. Matthew wasn't anywhere near the store so all it would show was the car rolling in and nothing else. It was a good thing he made sure Ludwig was dead otherwise maybe he could've signaled to the cameras somehow, but since that didn't happen the film would be boring to watch. Clearly, the police were desperate if they were looking for *anything*.

The customer was still bugging the cashier about the issue and Matthew really did feel sorry. That used to be his job - placating people he couldn't tell to leave him alone.

He turned back to the newspaper stand. Matthew wanted a paper, so he'd take a paper. Good thing Ludwig was no more.

There were a few different papers from different printing companies, all with the Trail Killer on the front cover with attention-grabbing headlines of all the important events that transpired in the past 24 hours.

Chief of police condemns 'maniac' killer

Serial killer leaves behind Trail of destruction

Combat curfew to counteract 'cowardly' killer

Superhero cop slaughtered in 'unnecessary attack'

Explosive escalation of cruelty to 'horrific scale' by 'barbaric criminal'

The tragedy that will 'plague this city for years to come'

Police Chief calls Trail Killer case 'top priority'

Matthew settled on the newspaper that felt the thickest. As long as it had the story then it didn't matter which paper he picked up.

He really should throw his paper stash out to completely minimize loose ends, but he doubted it would matter. There was no other evidence against him. Matthew could say he hoarded the newspapers for any other reason that could pass as normal or acceptable and they couldn't prove otherwise. It would simply be circumstantial evidence and if anyone wanted to prove who he was and what he was capable of, they'd need something with more merit. And if they had anything with actual merit, then that would be all they needed and the newspapers wouldn't mean a thing.

So he bought the paper along with the rest of his basket and stepped back outside. The officers were still standing by the door, one leaning back on the wall with eyes shut as if trying to catch up on rest.

It was definitely best not to approach or interact with any of the law enforcement. Not when Ludwig said the killer would try to inject himself into the investigation.

Matthew walked home biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling.

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When he got home it was simple to take out the relevant articles. Instead of cutting up the newspaper, all he had to do was remove the many *many* pages that held countless articles about *everything* to do with last night. Well, nearly everything. He did notice a few interesting exceptions.

Matthew sat on his bedroom floor as he read through Ludwig's grand history with police work up until his murder and another tribute eulogy singing his praises. The next page had the investigation into his death and the scene of the crime. The planned memorial. No mention of the stolen gun or radio... interesting. Matthew hadn't seen that mentioned anywhere and was likely being kept hush-hush by the police. Either from shame, worry of public response or just to keep something private between them and the killer. Possibly all three but the police had the excuse of keeping that detail private to identify the killer later. Convenient. Really convenient. Too bad he was satisfied otherwise he might be inspired to go after the police for revenge because of every single choice they made that could make them look bad was immediately covered up.

Matthew kept reading through the pages, about more victims before finally the show-stopping finale, the explosion. Witness accounts of the fireball. Investigation of the scene. The Chief's announcement, his distaste for the murderer and his promises of justice. The curfew. Police from other states lending their best. The prioritisation of the investigation.

Matthew read through them with sinister interest before tucking those pages away into his collection and binning the scraps.

It was interesting how the police *somehow* dodged having to take responsibility. Maybe it was because of the massive distraction available. Something Matthew had given them, but also only something he could do because of the opportunity they gave him by not taking him seriously.

Well now all eyes were on the police and if they slipped up again, maybe this time the public would notice and they wouldn't get away with it.

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Matthew took his phone and navigated deep into the park until he came across where he hid the radio. He pulled it from its hiding place and turned it on as he made himself comfortable to scroll on his phone.

There was still traffic on the radio, though most of it was codes and unhurried tones, nothing like last night. There was some talk about the crime scenes he had created and he paused to listen in to hear officers from the soon-to-be memorial site and the explosion ground zero since that's where most of the action was. Occasionally there was talk about individual victim's scenes, but it was mostly officers just noting that the work was done there and for cleanup crews to be ushered in. Matthew had to admit, their speed was impressive and a testament to how hard they worked.

Matthew took note of everything he heard. Any information could become useful later. But he was primarily focused on his phone and discussions about the Trail Killer online. And one of the best place for active discussions was the subreddit dedicated to him. It had grown exponentially in the past day and Matthew couldn't be prouder.

4.9K

Does anyone know the trail killer's official kill count I cant find it online anywhere (r/TrailKiller)

submitted 4 hours ago by guttermilk

Basially the title. I think it's sus I can't find it anywhere not even the police website or facebook or even on this sub. What have I missed?

172 comments

georgiegeorge172 points 4 hours ago

It'll probably say on the memorial, unless there are additional victims since

knaves_21135 points 3 hours ago

Yeah there'll defo be more

WannabeNordic79 points 3 hours ago

If there's more it's not really practical to keep adding after it's built. I think it shouldn't be built until they catch the guy and can make sure there arent more victims.

ciao_sweetie42 221 points 4 hours ago

IDK why the police haven't told us which is weird because they keep talking about how bad he is. You'd think they'd want us to know

PrincylyFrog113 points 3 hours ago

What if there's more they don't know about? There has to be a reason they're not saying right??

guttermilk

69 points 2 hours ago

Yeah I hate to say it but that's what I'm starting to think cus I seriously can't find anything

Murican_Merican92 points 2 hours ago

Maybe theres heaps so they dont wanna tell everyone cus ppl will panic and put pressure on police

3.9K

Why aren't there more serial killers nowadays? I thought this only happened in the 80's (r/TrailKiller)

submitted 5 hours ago by Danesz_slaughterhaus

Not trying to sound like I'm disappointed but there were so many serial killers in the 80s and I just can't believe they they all magically went away.

189 comments

paaaaaaaaastal0ver407 points 5 hours ago

Probably because mass murder is the new fad and that's because it's easier to do.

firststar131 points 3 hours ago

This^^^

tomatoVtomato341 points 4 hours ago

Maybe there's still serial killers around but they're just better at hiding it?

TraverserOtime325 points 4 hours ago

prolly why this guy's so big cus he lets the police find his victims. imagine if he didn't... we wouldn't even know

ReinventedSchriber334 points 3 hours ago

Homicide has actually gone down since the 80s but missing persons have gone exponentially up so make with that what you will

deutscherliebe262 points 2 hours ago

Correlation doesn't equal causation but I guess that's one take away from that

yaoish1pper271 points 2 hours ago

DNA evidence ruined everything lol

ny_sleeper250 points 2 hours ago

ikr? Now I gotta find a new hobby

nekonekoknee42 points 2 hours ago

/jk?

[deleted]166 points 3 hours ago

Cus everyone was doped up on lead back then prolly

HelpMeTheresARockInMySock158 points 2 hours ago

That's actually considered a big factor cus suddenly there were thousands active in the 80s when there weren't that many before and there were more serial killers in specific areas of the country instead of an even ratio

mummyrussia69420134 points 2 hours ago

most victims were gays or prostitutes so no one cared about them then so nobody knew if they disappeared

LazyActivister17 points 2 hours ago

Cops sucked back then just as much as they suck now but they just don't suck when it comes to murder just everything else acab

718

Friendly reminder not to compare this guy to any of the other big serial killer names because that's disrespectful to the family's of victims left behind (r/TrailKiller)

submitted 3 hours ago by redr00m

187 comments

HeroicGentleman457 points 3 hours ago

Then stay off this forum???

Butterfly_Fish422 points 3 hours ago

*Families

VikingBattleaxe306 points 2 hours ago

You can't control what other people do on the internet so don't bother

GhostlyPast202 points 2 hours ago

Are you stupid? This guy IS a big name now because look at the shit he did. When he's caught everyone will remember his name because of the level of carnage he achieved, not to mention public interest will keep him relevant for a long time

HummingbirdHeart157 points 2 hours ago

yep everyone in the city knows about it while he's active instead of just after he's caught so the media will drag this out for as long as possible and this guy will get lots of screen time

StrangeNightThangsz143 points 2 hours ago

I remember there was a segment literally every night about the trial killer until it stopped for some reason and then last night happened. I was too optimistic to think the trail killer had either stopped or been caught but no one said anything because maybe the police didn't want to have people idolise him for whatever reason

Sleepy_little_bird113 points 2 hours ago

Shit I remember that too! Guess he wasn't active then?

5.3k

I would've thought that it was impossible to be a serial killer in the 21st century(r/TrailKiller)

submitted 3 hours ago by germouser

201 comments

ClubofConfidents589 points 3 hours ago

Nah, check this from the atlantic about modern serial killers about the rate of murder cases solved. In 1965, the U.S. homicide clearance rate was 91 percent. By 2017, it had dropped to 61.6 percent, one of the lowest rates in the Western world. In other words, about 40 percent of the time, murderers get away with murder. Seems that cops are just lazy or sum

GemiStar477 points 3 hours ago

I thought so too because there are cameras everywhere now but they haven't even got one grainy picture?

Innocent_shades418 points 2 hours ago

yeah where's the shitty bank footage ahhh videos flooding every platform?

HetalianvendettaxXx298 points 1 hour ago

Probably too much meme potential to be worth it cus no one takes shit seriously anymore lol

4.3k

Do any amateur profilers have anything new after what happened? (r/TrailKiller)

submitted 6 hours ago by TheBeetle

I keep arguing with my partner if the killer's gonna adhere to the curfew or not so I could use a second opinion.

457 comments

mindboggler622 points 6 hours ago

I really don't know but I have a feeling the trail killer won't like it and might blow up another service station... or worse

nananuhuh371 points 6 hours ago

fuck Im gonna be so paranoid refilling from now on

GreekKats263 points 5 hours ago

And it's not even safer to walk lmao we're fucked

Chronicallylatespanishguy259 points 5 hours ago

It's safe to walk during the day when people are around

VodkaBearHugs417 points 5 hours ago

Looks like an escalation, like how he moved on from the park to the city. Since there's no signs of sexual or normal abuse to the bodies I think it's for the thrill. At first I thought it wasn't about power/control because he doesn't control the environment by doing it somewhere private like in his own home or the victim's home. But I think it's actually a power move against society. Killers get something out of this and want to relive the thrill which can be done by just turning on the TV or scrolling this forum. The appeal for the guy has to be the reaction. He probably will break the curfew because that would get a reaction and the media would give nonstop coverage so the guy can relive all he wants

Tearboilthemfrogs365 points 3 hours ago

So the police should stfu then and go silent?

lonelymapleleaf157 points 3 hours ago

Maybe, it could make him worse if he doesn't get his fix. But if he gets worse he'll get sloppy so at least they'll catch him

9.4K

[Poll] Is the killer sexy or ugly af?(r/TrailKiller)

submitted 3 hours ago byVeraVerser

SEXY [▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓|⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜] 55%

UGLY [▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓|⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜] 45%

[10,457 votes]

837 comments

ScotlandFOREVERRRRRRR703 points 3 hours ago

If he's ugly he better hope he don't get caught or he's gonna be roasted so hard. The internet has no mercy and never forgets.

purgatoryeye573 points 3 hours ago

Fuck I hope he is he'll become a meme legend fr I love how unserious this generation is

deadmentellnotales537 points 3 hours ago

For some reason there's never any in between with these motherfuckers. It's either they're drop dead gorgeous and people simp for them and don't think they deserve jail or they're ugly and people aren't surprised

verse_of_cards416 points 3 hours ago

There needs to be a study done on people who thirst for these guys because something in their brain is underdeveloped

5.7K

Why can't the Trail Killer be a vigilante like Dexter?(r/TrailKiller)

submitted 5 hours ago byw_east

Man I really wish the Trail Killer was some kind of vigilante like Dexter because how cool would that be? There are a lot of criminals that just get off because the system's cooked so sooner or later someone's gonna get inspired to take matters into their own hands because the police don't (and to be fair sometimes can't because of stupid reason) do shit and the everyday person as to suffer.

633 comments

titanic_obsession759 points 5 hours ago

Welcome to reality...

Vinlander534 points 4 hours ago

Bruh

HolyRomanEgg412 points 3 hours ago

I want a refund

Sniggy673 points 4 hours ago

I wish he took requests

SexyGreenLadyStatue435 points 4 hours ago

lmao same I've got one name on this short list and it's just me

Become0ne376 points 3 hours ago

Don't be like that! You need to outlive your enemies! Don't you want the people who made you feel that way to pay?

SexyGreenLadyStatue343 points 3 hours ago

nah Im tired take me out

historicalwaifu194 points 3 hours ago

Valid

ill_wok_ur_world351 points 3 hours ago

If he was do you think the police would tell us? Probably not because we'd side with him. Society is so unbearable nowdays and it's probably just someone like the Joker with Joaquin Phoenix

AceWithAxe286 points 3 hours ago

tbf who hasn't felt like snapping after a bad day shit sucks so bad and we really do live in a society

CowlickHeart03276 points 3 hours ago

It would be really cool. Life's already so bizarre let's just throw a vigilante serial killer into the mix

puffinman261 points 3 hours ago

Someone should make a trail killer bingo card

New posts were flooding in by the minute yet Matthew was somehow able to read each and every one of them. But that forum wasn't the only place to get his fix, he cycled through other platforms for other opinions and just couldn't stop.

The only thing that made him stop was when the radio caught his attention. He listened and realised they were talking about the service station.

"-wreckage has been combed through and we've finally bagged all the evidence. We're just waiting on cleanup."

"Roger that."

"Well done, you guys move fast."

"It's been over 24 hours and we've got teams of other states so it's not that impressive."

"What'll be impressive is being able to sleep for 36 hours after this."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"Can you clear the frequency if you don't have anything urgent to say? Thank you," a new voice chirped.

"Look, I'm *tired* and I was supposed to clock off *yesterday afternoon* so hearing you *nag* about being professional is getting on my nerves. It's passive-aggressive and it's annoying how you assume we're all doing it to spite *you*." A gruff voice snapped.

"If you can't deal with the constant and *necessary* chatter as we deal with a *crisis*, then just turn off your radio because I find it hard to believe that you don't have *something* to deal with that's more urgent than policing your coworkers," Voiced another.

"I don't see how it's *necessary*-" The chirpy voice scoffed.

"Maybe not for the work, but certainly for our mental health! Cops are human too and this is all taking a toll on us. I don't know where the fuck you are but I've been pulling out crispy body parts all day and it's going to ruin KFC for me so just shut it. If you wanna pretend you're the bigger person just turn off your fucking radio-"

"Hey, arguing isn't productive so how about everyone turns off their radio and steps away for a breather? No one would blame you if you left your work-" Someone new tried to meditate.

"And what? Drag it out longer and get home later? Fuck off." The gruff voice snapped.

"Guys, I know we're all stressed and don't really mean any of this-"

"Damn right we are stressed-"

'Oi," A new voice interjected and listed some codes. "I will have to insist that chatter is kept to a minimum. Just because this has turned into a big mess doesn't mean our professionalism has to falter too."

"God you sound so much like Beilschmidt right now..."

A moment of silence sounded loud when heard through the radio.

"Anyway, I also insist that after everyone clocks off, contact the department's mental health resources."

"Yeah, no shit."

"But until further notice keep the chatter for your partners on the field. Due to the codes in effect, these airways need to be clear and cleaner than an addict trying to get visitation, got it?"

"But why now?"

"Yeah if we were gonna get booted off it should've been last night."

"Shit- It's cus we didn't find the radio, right?"

"Fuck- are you serious?"

"Wait, you mean it wasn't at the explosion?!"

"No, we just finished and-"

"Remember the code. Keep discussions to a minimum. We don't know who could be listening in."

"Fuck, no way-"

"As if the *killer's* actually listening in *right* now-"

"It's a possibility but we don't know for sure. Now everyone, *keep* it to a minimum."

"Shit! He could though cus remember Beilschmidt's profile-"

"Exactly so don't give out any information."

"Roger that."

"Fuuuuck, got it."

"Is this going to be brought up in a debriefing because surely sudden silence would be suspicious?"

"Well if this *fucker's* never had a *police radio before*, then how would he know what's normal? Maybe we're just this professional *every time*."

"Save your thoughts for the debriefing, got it?"

"Our hands are tied until the Chief can make a call about this so it's all touch and go for now."

"Yes, got it."

Matthew stared at the now silent radio. Of course they would come to that conclusion, it was only logical. He didn't feel threatened. He could always dump the radio at any time... but why would he do that if he didn't have a reason? If anything, he was interested in what the police would do now that they *knew* that he had the radio, or at least heavily speculated. The ball was in their court now.

Matthew just turned back to his phone, now looking through location community groups for any details. The radio still occasionally made noise but it wasn't like before. Now it really was the bare minimum and completely sanitary professionalism that bored him because he didn't understand any of the codes used. He wasn't going to Google cops code now when the police would have an eye out for anyone with a sudden interest in understanding police lingo. Matthew knew that anything suspicious that was searched online would be monitored, that was just the day and age they lived in.

Well, anything *telling* would stick out to someone monitoring searches. Matthew was safe to browse discussions about the Trail Killer because that's what half the city was doing anyway. He wouldn't stand out for showing an interest in that now. So he kept scrolling and digging through everything he could find.

When his phone suddenly made the telling noise of having received a notification Matthew was pulled out from his obsession and realized that hours had passed. He was just so caught up in all the attention he didn't realise the time. Yeah, he knew the attention-seeking online came from being ignored all his life but... even so, it felt so *so* good to have it now.

Though Matthew did pause when he saw the notification was a text, which could only be from Alfred... He didn't expect to hear from his brother so soon. A smirk tugged at his face as he opened it.

Hopefully, this was going to be *good*.

Chapter End Notes

This reddit html was such a pain in the ass ngl so I hope my random creativity pays off but I don't think I'll do it again. Deadass took over 5 hours smh and I still don't know why some of the 'comments' have different sized fonts but I'm going to pick my battles and convince myself I don't care. Please enjoy the simulated reddit experience

Also I still can't believe it but I am so so honoured to have inspired fan art with this fic!
LightTree on Ao3 / beetroota on tumblr made some cool art
https://www.tumblr.com/beetroota/755331692113330176/made-some-art-for-a-fanfic-333-the-fanfic-is

hecc44 on Ao3 Also made some cool art!
https://imgpile.com/p/9N2lHbp

AND hecc44 also made an animatic!!
*https://youtu.be/G2qaKXuGR2c?si=B2xa-n8_IEYN2qB_*

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> To celebrate my birthday next week, have an early chapter! (I might not be able to update next week)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alfred
Change of plants
whatever youre making for dinner times by 5
**plans fuck*

Matthew felt his shoulders slump as he picked himself off the cold grass and slowly stretched. He didn't know how to feel about this request.

On one hand, he did not want *obligation*. He could do the whole song and dance of acting like he was expected to, it wasn't that hard. He didn't like to do it anymore and hated himself for ever having done it. But that wasn't the problem. Matthew knew who the company was. It wasn't that hard to figure out.

It was only 5 in the evening, so the curfew couldn't save him from the impending situation.

On the other hand... Why was he thinking so negatively? Isn't this exactly what he wanted? This development meant he could see firsthand how Gilbert was dealing with the fallout. But that meant having to deal with Gilbert at the same time. That by itself wasn't preferable, never mind the fact that Gilbert would be in an altered state of mind and no doubt more *extreme* than he usually was. Matthew knew from experience that no one would stop Gilbert from taking out his emotions on other people.

Now Matthew had to be vigilant in his own home... but he was an expert at being vigilant. He weighed it up. It would be worth it.

He *needed* to see how Gilbert was coping with all of this. And thanks to Alfred, the show was being brought right to him.

Maybe he could fish out more details under the guise of confused worry.

Matthew
Why? What happened?

Alfred
can't stay at Gils

Matthew
Why not?

Alfred
its kinda a mess and Gil's upset being there
and feli
cant text driving bye

Oh, Feliciano too? He supposed that meant Antonio was with them as well. He couldn't wait to see the buffet of reactions that was being brought home for him to feast on.

Matthew made his way back home as he thought about an easy recipe for the surprise guests. At least he had time to prepare and build up the anticipation. He had no idea what was going to walk through that door and picturing it only made him more eager.

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Matthew was almost done with dinner when Alfred came home, seeming unphased by the state of his party's arrival. It didn't leave Matthew with any questions that couldn't be answered by just thinking about the current situation, but it was still... odd.

Alfred himself looked hesitantly pained, which was the best look out of everyone there. Clearly, he was just trying to be strong and comfort his clingy friend - Feliciano, who clinging to his front like a koala bear as he grabbed onto Alfred's jacket tightly and buried his face into it as he cried. No matter how far Feliciano shoved his face into that tear-stained and soaked jacket, his heaving sobs couldn't be smothered.

Antonio was definitely competing with Alfred for being the best put-together of the group, but Matthew could tell that he was agitated too. His cheeks were glossy, his eyes were dull and he was twitching. But he had the luxury of distracting himself with the impossible task that was calming Gilbert. Or at the very least keeping him close. Antonio had Gilbert's hand in his and despite how tight Antonio was holding on, his albino friend didn't seem to be feeling any better.

Gilbert looked like shit. Even without actually being able to see Feliciano's face, Matthew could just tell that Gilbert looked the worst. It was the blood that gave it away. Besides his skin being bright red from blush, there was blood running down from Gilbert's head... and his nose, his ear, his mouth, his hand... a few places actually and Matthew wouldn't be surprised if there were places he couldn't see. At least it looked like his own blood and not someone else's.

It wasn't just blood that made Gilbert look like shit. There were bruises on his face, hands and knuckles. Like Gilbert had punched something until his fingers turned purple and smacked into a door frame headfirst. Gilbert's eyes were bloodshot to the point of medical concern and he kept them fixed on the floor as his face twisted into something permanently ugly.

In short, Gilbert had Matthew's full morbid attention and Matthew couldn't be happier that he was here.

"Is that dinner?" Alfred said and snatched Matthew's attention.

"Yeah, it's almost ready," Matthew replied and turned to deal with it, all while keeping Gilbert in his peripheral vision.

Then there was silence as everyone stood there awkwardly for a moment. Not knowing what to say or do next.

It was Alfred who couldn't take the perceived awkwardness and decided to keep everything moving.

"You guys can spoon in my bed," Alfred turned to Antonio and Gilbert. "Just dump your stuff in there and if you wanna shower you can. In fact please do shower. It might make you feel better."

Gilbert just nodded as he rubbed at his throat with a stiff hand and a faraway look.

"What about you?" Antonio asked, his face turning to concern as he looked at Alfred and Feliciano.

"Me and Feli can spoon on the couch," Alfred said lightly like he was trying to be amusing and not stupid.

"Are you going to fit?" Antonio asked.

"Determination? I don't know, I could lay on Feli like a blanket? Maybe the pressure would help?"

"I hope so," Antonio looked at the couch with a conflicted expression before deciding that they'd fit and letting it go. He let go of Gilbert's hand and pushed him forward. "How about you shower and I'll get everything from the car?"

Gilbert looked like he wanted to say something, his face was still painfully twisted but instead just nodded before shutting himself in the bathroom.

"I'll help you grab-" Alfred went to say as he jostled Feliciano in his tight hold.

"No, don't worry about it," Antonio was quick to shut it down. "Just look after Feli, alright?"

"Yeah, will do," Alfred sighed before calling to Gilbert- "Help yourself to whatever but *please* don't Hulk out in there."

There wasn't a reply.

"Man, I really need a more up-to-date reference, is Marvel even relevant anymore?" Alfred muttered as he lugged Feliciano over to the couch. He pulled his friend down to sit and tried to help get his breathing under control.

Matthew turned his attention back to dinner. It was almost done so he grabbed out the necessary bowls and cutlery. The house was silent save for whatever whimpering noises Feliciano was making and Alfred's quiet reassurances. Antonio came back in and dropped off a few bags by the couch before adding his own reassuring coos as he brought Feliciano into a hug.

When Matthew announced that dinner was ready, Gilbert was still in the shower. But Alfred surprised him by banging on the door and demanding that Gilbert come out to eat. Matthew tried to say that wasn't really necessary because he could reheat Gilbert's portion but Alfred didn't stop banging until he heard the water turn off. At least Gilbert took his sweet time getting ready so Matthew could eat dinner in peace without him there, without worrying if he was going to snap. Seeing him earlier gave Matthew the impression that he was wound up like a rubber band and any moment now he would explode. It left him feeling shamefully apprehensive because he *shouldn't* be feeling *conflicted* like this. He should be 100% happy but he couldn't ignore this feeling inside him that said to be scared.

Alfred and Antonio were making small talk to each other as they ate, likely trying to act as normal as possible but Feliciano just sniffled miserably with dull eyes as he picked at his food. Gilbert didn't come out until everyone else had finished eating.

"How's the voice?" Alfred asked as he passed Gilbert a plate.

Gilbert went to answer but it just seemed like he was mouthing words with great frustration. Not that it was all silence, some broken croaks were coming from his throat that just sounded painful, but immediately tipped Matthew off that somehow Gilbert had lost his voice. The implications of that were interesting. But it didn't make Matthew any less wary of the albino as the other sat at the table to eat. Gilbert still had his fists...

Antonio cringed at the state of his friend's voice and Feliciano hiccuped as more tears formed.

"Sheesh, maybe you shouldn't've screamed so much," Alfred grimaced and Gilbert nodded lamely as he agreed. "Maybe you should stay here until your neighbours get their hearing back."

"I'm sure your neighbours understand, amigo," Antonio added.

"Anyone else wanna shower?" Alfred asked as he looked between Antonio and Feliciano, almost pleadingly like *he wanted them to shower*.

"Come on amigo, it might make you feel better," Antonio said softly as he pulled Feliciano.

"No it won't! I know it won't!" Feliciano's warbling voice insisted but still let himself be pulled.

"It'll help me feel better knowing you're being looked after."

Antonio managed to convince Feliciano to go in by going in with him, which had Alfred let out a breath of relief once the door was shut and turned his focus back onto a brooding Gilbert.

"Well, at least it seems like you aren't *hurt* hurt, well, you are hurt but not hospital level thankfully cus the only first aid I know is bandaids which I guess I'll still get you anyways. But maybe we can do something for the whole voice thing? Mattie-"

Matthew was surprised that they were acknowledging he was there. Right now he was just a specter spectator, just doing the dishes fully expecting to be ignored... but he shouldn't be surprised that he was remembered when someone needed something from him.

"-can you make something that might help his voice? Like some maple smoothie or something that soothes? A soothing smoothie? A *soothie*, if you will?" Alfred chuckled. "I don't know, just *something* that could help Gil get his voice back?"

"Yeah, I can," Matthew had to agree and pulled his hands from the warm water. Maybe he could've said no if he added that he didn't know how to help but he could imagine Alfred pressing anyway.

"Okay, cool! I'm gonna go searching for band-aids then," Alfred announced as he left. Matthew froze as he wiped his hands on a towel and his eyes landed on the albino, whose back was to him as he slowly picked at his food.

Fuck, Alfred couldn't go. Because then Matthew would be left with Gilbert. Alone. But he couldn't vocalise that. He couldn't vocalise anything. There was no calling out for his brother and no explaining. Never any being understood. Matthew twisted his hand tightly into the towel.

Coward. He wanted to *see* how Gilbert was suffering and he got exactly what he wanted. Only it made him realise just how fucked up Matthew was. Matthew hated not feeling in control of himself and he knew what he was feeling. He was on edge. He didn't feel safe near Gilbert at all and Matthew swelled with feelings of hatred, directed at *himself*.

Because after *everything* Matthew was *ashamed* that someone had power over him *still* and didn't even fucking *know it*! Matthew couldn't breathe and all he could think was that he was fucking weak.

Matthew *had to do something*. He had to prove that he wasn't weak, that he could override his programming and do *something* and take power *back*. Something that would prove that *Gilbert* was the one who wasn't safe with *Matthew* and Matthew could get over the shaking in his hands and lump in his throat.

Matthew had to do *something* or that meant he allowed shit to happen, allowed himself to be pushed around and *mistreated*-

An idea came to him and Matthew quickly grabbed what he needed. Every instinct was primed to be aware of catching attention as he set about what he decided to do but Alfred wasn't here to notice and Gilbert was too moody to take any joy in making Matthew uncomfortable for entertainment. No one was watching, as usual. No one would know.

With all the ingredients put into a shaker, Matthew made sure to add a generous dosage of maple syrup to hide any suspicious taste. He told himself it was necessary to waste the maple syrup like this as he connected the shaker to a blender.

"Here, this should make your throat feel better," Matthew said as he *held the drink out* for Gilbert to take, instead of sliding it across the counter or anything cowardly that wasn't just simply *passing* it into Gilbert's hand. Matthew didn't react when Gilbert took it from him without being gentle and brushed his fingers. Matthew made sure to retract his arm slowly because Gilbert did *not* have any power over him to make him act like a scared animal. Matthew wasn't the loser that they all thought he was.

Gilbert didn't offer any thanks, verbal or otherwise and began to drink.

Matthew just leaned back and watched on with keen eyes as he wondered if Gilbert even remembered what he did to Matthew. Did he forget? Or did he know yet simply saw it as acceptable and was completely oblivious to the pain he had caused. Matthew didn't know which idea he hated more. But either way it clearly never ate Gilbert up because even after all this time he never hinted that he felt even an inkling of remorse for it.

And why should he? It was *Matthew's problem*, right? Gilbert caused it but it was out of his hands now, right?

There was no way Matthew could poke or prod about how Gilbert felt about his bullying now, not with the looming situation haunting every interaction that would happen in the immediate future. But maybe Matthew would have another opportunity. After all, *confronting* meant showing strength, right?

Matthew couldn't help but smile as Gilbert drank it all. He was able to get that smile under control when Gilbert held out the empty shaker for Matthew to take, which Matthew did *without* touching him.

Matthew dunked the cup in the sink as he bit his lip. As much as he was intrigued by anticipation, he wasn't oblivious by the way his hands still trembled. At least this time it was partly from excitement.

This was the first time in a long time that Matthew was in the same room as Gilbert and all the memories of the past were demanding he pay attention and *watch out*. Because Gilbert was a bully and to Matthew's frustration he was never treated like the bully he was. Maybe that was why Matthew was feeling so paranoid. That any minute now he'd be under attack yet again. The memories plagued him.

In the past, Gilbert had a pinching problem. Alfred would insist it was called 'slapstick humour' and Matthew would feel like shit for having a problem with it. Because he did. Gilbert couldn't keep his hands to himself to save his life and for his and his friend's amusement, he'd annoy - rather harass, unwitting victims. Most of his harassment was just verbal and social which Matthew definitely found stressful, but Gilbert had no hesitation going further. He'd go as far as to pinch his victims and if the person showed any reaction, *any reaction at all* there would be laughter. But if there was no reaction then Gilbert would just steam through and continue until there was. Asking for him to stop or wanting *any respect* was just met with mockery and claims of sensitivity.

So like a dog, Matthew was *fucking* trained. Avoid Gilbert at all costs. And if he couldn't, then throw his dignity away and give in, humiliate himself by giving Gilbert exactly what he wanted - a reaction, then hope he'd be left *alone*.

Matthew hated that he had just *bent* to others' wills. He would be taking back his power, no matter what.

Matthew positioned himself on the opposite side of the counter when Alfred came back, a pack of colourful neon band-aids in hand and some ointment.

"Look what I found! How does all the colours sound? Well, I know you can't answer so that's what you're getting. Also, I got this ointment, dunno what the fuck it does but it might help with the bruising?"

Alfred peeled off the band-aids and carefully stuck them on every visible cut. Once he was done, he rolled up Gilbert's sleeves... Matthew had to wonder if he fell on glass or something because his arms looked terrible and scratched all over. Clearly, it was something Alfred knew about because he was unbothered as he stuck on band-aids.

Gilbert was still steadily eating as he cooperated with Alfred putting on the band-aids... until Gilbert went stiff and slowly put down his fork.

"What? What's wrong?" Alfred asked before sighing. "Fuck, right, you can't answer. Just type it out-"

Gilbert jumped up and bolted for the toilet. Then he was violently puking his guts out, full-on body heaving and fighting for breath as bruised fingers clung to the porcelain bowl. Alfred was right behind him and rubbing his friend's back through it all, and like a shadow Matthew lingered in the doorway with eyes fixed on the display.

He had been waiting for the drink to settle in Gilbert's stomach. He had to bite back a feral grin.

Gilbert reaped what he fucking sewed. If Gilbert wasn't an asshole Matthew would've had no reason to do what he had to do. And he had to do it because now his hands were steady and Matthew felt like he was free. He had his power back.

If he can fight against Gilbert now, he could do it when it counted should Gilbert treat him like shit again.

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Once Gilbert stopped regurgitating he was by no means out of energy. Despite still being tethered to the toilet, Gilbert's attitude suddenly exploded as the events of the day took hold of him again.

Despite it all, Matthew still felt safe and didn't flinch at the yelling. If anything he was finding it hard to keep his face in line and stifle his grin.

The beginning of the rant was lost on him, but Matthew picked up that Gilbert wanted to pull his hair out and smash the toilet with his head through his angry tone and excessive swearing. It seemed the soothing smoothie had worked a little because, with as much force as Gilbert was forcing on his voice, he was actually speaking. Cracked and hoarse, but speaking.

Then he started making sense.

"Fucking hell I'm so *angry* I want to destroy *everything*! I can't-"

Alfred tried to grab him but Gilbert jerked away.

"NO! I don't care if I get hurt! Because it already hurts! I can't stop it!" Gilbert was violently possessed by his regret as he began punching the side of the toilet. "Fuck! Why?! I can't stop *thinking* about it! I told you- *Lud*- He called me last night and, and now I hurt my bro and I wish Ludwig never had to find out! Why'd he have to find out?!"

Gilbert was pulling at his hair with one tense hand and clinging to the toilet with the other.

"He's *dead* and I can't stop thinking about fucking *this*! What's wrong with me I'm the worst brother! I *wish* I never went out! I wish I *never* went out! I didn't- FUCK!"

Gilbert was rocking back and forth as if he were trying to stop himself from being destructive but finding it really hard to resist.

"I didn't *want* him to *know* because I *knew* it would stress him out but I *had* to do it and now I can't explain to Lud that I *had to do it* because I didn't know what else or whatever- how else to do I just did it because I needed to feel okay and- and Lud was *so mad* he *hated me* but I didn't mean to and he thought I was stupid and *Opa*-"

"Hey! No! It's okay, just breathe!" Alfred was fighting to be heard and prevent Gilbert's fists from flying everywhere. "Fucking hell- He *never hated you*, okay? He was just scared cus he knew it was dangerous and you can't blame yourself or think that he hated you because we were all just trying to do what we could to feel alright! So it's not like we were really thinking about it, we were just *trying* to help so don't feel bad about it! You were just doing what you have to and I just know that if you got a chance to explain, Lud would've understood!"

"No!" Gilbert's fists were flying at Alfred now and Alfred just let his friend beat his arm. "No, NO! He said it was *stupid* and I know I knew at the time it was stupid! He thinks-"

"NO, he would've said the *way we were doing it* was stupid which we already knew, remember? But he would've understood WHY. Ludwig was *always understanding*, remember?"

Gilbert made a pathetic sound that was like a hiccuping sob.

"It's not your fault!" Alfred continued. "Everyone was upset when our friends died so we were just trying to feel better and get justice-"

"But now Lud's- my baby brother- he was my baby brother!" Gilbert started throwing up again, this time it had nothing to do with what Matthew gave him.

With Gilbert's back turned Alfred let his face slip into something painfully twisted as he bit his lip. Then he continued with his useless reassurances as he pat his friend's back. When Gilbert shakily wiped at his mouth he went to say something, but his voice was lost again.

"Don't push it, dude. Let's just take one day at a time."

Then Gilbert started thrashing and screaming, despite his broken voice barely reaching a loud enough volume to hear.

"AND IT WASN'T EVEN *FUCKING WORTH IT*! I couldn't- HE NEEDS TO DIE I NEED TO KILL THAT ASSHOLE! FUCK! I NEED TO- I'LL CUT HIM UP AND KILL HIM JUST LIKE HE DID TO MY BABY BROTHER- I'LL KILL HIM! HE NEEDS TO PAY AND I NEED TO- FUCK!"

"Dude, you're gonna hurt yourself again!" Alfred gave him a hug from behind that also contained Gilbert's violent outburst of thrashing limbs. "And don't scream or you'll fuck up your voice more."

Gilbert ignored him and kept screaming. Not anything in particular, just screaming. Alfred tried to pat his friend on the back and validate his friend's feelings as Gilbert slowly lost steam and slumped into Alfred.

Gilbert just hung his head as he balled his hands and sobbed. Apparently, the guilt was unbearable.

"Don't you fucking worry," Alfred said with determination, "if the cops don't find this guy we will and I'll let you rough him up a bit before he rots in prison forever."

Chapter End Notes

hecc44 also made an animatic for this fic!! It's pretty good so check it out!
*https://youtu.be/G2qaKXuGR2c?si=B2xa-n8_IEYN2qB_*

Chapter 23

Everyone tensed when a sound rang out. Such a normal sound that it felt foreign and intrusive, taking Matthew a second to realise it was the doorbell. Alfred first calmed from the sudden noise before reluctantly leaving Gilbert crying on the toilet and Matthew stuck his head down the hall out to see who was there as his brother answered. Unsurprisingly, someone Alfred knew. But surprisingly, someone Alfred wasn't expecting.

"Oh, Kiku? Hey!" Alfred cleared his rough voice. "What are you doing here? You doing alright?"

"I'm sorry, I did text in advance. I understand if you couldn't reply and I can leave if you'd like-"

"NO!" Alfred shot a hand out to grab Kiku's shoulder. "I mean, no, stay. I know you want to stay too so just come in."

Alfred stepped back and pretty much yanked Kiku inside before locking the door behind them.

"You're stuck here now!" Alfred said as he forced his friend into a hug.

Kiku had brought a bag that was slung over his shoulder and his face was completely blank, somehow more so than usual. It must've been his eyes, which held more emotion than Matthew had usually seen from him. But it made sense, Kiku was close to Ludwig too.

"So are you okay? I mean obviously fucking not but uh, can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you." Kiku kept his gaze down as his hands wrung around his bag strap.

Alfred just nodded exaggeratedly before striding over and sticking his ear to the bathroom door. The shower wasn't running anymore but the others hadn't come out yet. Alfred rubbed at his chin as he thought about something.

"Alright, new sleepover arrangements," Alfred turned to Kiku. "You spoon with Feli on the couch. That alright with you?"

Kiku nodded stiffly.

"Cool. I'll share with you, Mattie."

Matthew was a little surprised at this turn of events but figured it was the obvious solution to the situation Alfred found himself in. Matthew nodded but Alfred was busy knocking on the bathroom door and didn't see his answer. He probably wasn't expecting one and Matthew was just supposed to go along with it. Lucky for Alfred, Matthew truly didn't mind. Otherwise, he'd be able to worm his way out of it just like Gilbert and the spiked shake. Maybe a little cowardly, but Matthew had to look out for number one. He wasn't willing to get used.

"Guys, just letting you know that Kiku's staying the night."

Alfred must've expected a reaction because he jumped back and not a second later the door was flying open as a half-dressed Feliciano threw himself at Kiku and wrapped him into a tight hug.

"I'm so glad you're okay! You're okay, right? Are you okay? I'm so sorry I know you don't like hugs and all but-"

Feliciano would've kept jabbering if Kiku hadn't cut him off.

"It's fine." Kiku wrapped his arms around his friend. "I'm sorry for your loss."

And then Feliciano was crying again while an unphased Kiku held him.

"It's your loss too! I'm sorry for your loss! Why did this have to happen? It's not fair-"

Alfred acted before it could spiral.

"Group hug! We're glad you're here!" Alfred sandwiched Feliciano and squeezed. "Anyways, change of plans. Feli, you'll be spooning Kiku tonight and not me. So you can make sure he's feeling alright too. If everyone uses the buddy system we can get through the night."

Antonio came out of the bathroom fully clothed and completely dry, and joined in the hug too. Alfred didn't notice Antonio's state until after the hug broke up.

"You didn't shower? Did you want to?"

"No, it's fine... I'd rather keep an eye on Gil." Antonio's eyes widened when he saw where Gilbert was.

"Yeah uh, you missed out, he had another *thing*," Alfred explained. "It wasn't violent this time so I guess it's okay but I bet his voice is sore as fuck."

Gilbert made a sound of agreement, sounding like nails on a chalkboard and wincing as he rubbed his throat.

"Sheesh amigo, what are you doing there?" Antonio said as he went to fuss over Gilbert before hastily adding- "Don't answer!"

"He cried and threw up," Alfred gestured with his arm to make up for his lack of explanation. Not that his explanation was even necessary. Alfred shook his head before walking off and brought back a glass of water to give to Gilbert. Then Alfred checked his phone.

"Anyways, uh, I really want to watch the news and I get if anyone doesn't want to, whoever doesn't can just get comfy in my room and I'll keep the volume down," Alfred announced before bending to help Gilbert up.

"Wha'-" Gilbert broke into a painful coughing fit that had everyone cringing.

"I think you should go to bed early because you must be so fucking tired and then your voice will get better-"

Gilbert was shaking his head and pointing at the TV. He wanted to watch it too and knew Alfred was trying to stop him. So with a sigh, Alfred stepped back and then turned to Feliciano. The Italian knew what was coming.

"No! I want to watch! I need to watch! Please-" Feliciano was pleading while shaking like a leaf and ducking behind Kiku. Alfred put his hands up in surrender.

"Okay, I won't fight you but you do know you'll get really upset so I just think it'll be for the best-"

"I don't *care*! I'm already upset so it doesn't matter and I need to know! What if I miss something important and I need to know! I want to know..."

"Not knowing would upset him more," Antonio wrapped an arm around Feliciano. "If we're here for him then maybe it won't be so bad."

"Yeah okay," Alfred sighed painfully. "Alright, does everyone wanna watch it then?"

Yes, everyone wanted to watch it. Matthew was just so eager to see how things developed as the day went on and as far as he was concerned, the more watching the merrier. The entertainment didn't stop at the TV.

The room was tense as everyone set up in the living room. There wasn't enough room on the couch so Matthew knew he'd have to be the one to stand. Fine by him, as long as he got to watch. Antonio also stood, allowing Kiku, Alfred and Gilbert to sit on the couch with Feliciano being pulled onto Alfred's lap and a tight hug.

Alfred turned on the TV and everyone waited in anticipation for the news to come on. They didn't have to wait long.

The police were doing yet another press conference for the media yet again and once again the Chief of Police made another appearance. Completely expected given the man's attitude about nationally scorning the Trail Killer but what Matthew didn't see coming was Gilbert's reaction. Gilbert made a strangled noise and pointed as a hand pressed over his mouth. Antonio leaned down to give him a hug and Gilbert fisted his hands into his friend's shirt as he kept his eyes on the Chief. Those eyes were full of emotion, barely contained and threatening to burst through.

"Uh, shit, isn't that...?" Alfred trailed off and cringed like he regretted bringing it up. He continued talking anyway. "Uh, has he contacted you at all... yet?"

Antonio answered for Gilbert by shaking his head at Alfred, who pulled a face of disapproval.

"Your poor grandfather," Feliciano's voice wobbled. The tearful Italian moved over to cling at Gilbert instead, who had a conflicted expression, twisted with malice and angst upon seeing his *grandfather* before tearing his glossy eyes away.

Matthew felt his eyebrows rise. He didn't know that the Chief of Police was Gilbert's grandfather, and by extension *Ludwig's*. Matthew could not have asked for a more cruel coincidence. That would certainly force the police to take everything seriously. Deadly seriously. Which was exactly what they were doing. Matthew bit his tongue as he watched on, hanging onto every development with morbid intrigue.

"We are diligently doing our best to ensure the safety and well-being of the city. We are working tirelessly to minimize the catastrophic damage from last night and put away the terrorist responsible for this chaos with the highest possible punishable consequences. We have our best and brightest focused on catching this despicable criminal who we refuse to be intimidated by."

Gilbert made to spit out a comment, but his voice wouldn't cooperate and so he just growled as he tried and failed to force it out.

Then Antonio looked conflicted as he made to move from Gilbert but reluctantly wouldn't untether his arm. Matthew noticed Antonio's twitching of uncertainty, Matthew had been trained well to recognise signs like this because he was trained to serve. What did Antonio need? Matthew just knew he was going to ask. It was going to happen.

Antonio was glancing around and saw him.

"Can you get some water?" Antonio asked.

Matthew couldn't say no. No reason to say no. No reason to expect hearing no because Matthew was nice and if anything he was probably expected to have thought to grab water for Gilbert before the albino even coughed.

Frustration was pushed aside in the face of the TV still running, Matthew knew he would have to put up his facade for the meantime no matter how conflicted it made him. Drastic times allowed for drastic measures. He gave in. Matthew didn't want to miss anything happening so he'd have to be quick.

As he filled a glass, he heard a reporter ask about who would take over the official investigative task force now that the lead detective was gone and Matthew held his breath as he listened.

"I will personally take over Officer Beilschmidt's position as lead detective on our dedicated investigation."

Something was thrown and everyone made noises of shock before Gilbert's voice drowned them out.

"O' course!" Gilbert's rough voice exclaimed as he threw his hands up. There was a pillow sitting in front of the TV, one he presumably threw. Gilbert went to say something else but his voice was too harsh and it came out hoarse. With frustration, Gilbert slapped his hands on his thighs and balled them up with a grunt.

"Isn't that good?" Feliciano asked. "Your grandfather's really smart, maybe he'll-"

Gilbert ripped his hands from where his palms were digging into his face as he twisted to *seethe* at Feliciano. Feliciano whimpered and Alfred jumped in as a shield. Kiku made to stand and somehow put himself between the two with a pained expression. Antonio jumped into action to wrap Gilbert into a constrictive hug.

"Amigo- hey, hey," Antonio grabbed at Gilbert's hands to stop him from digging his nails into his own arms as Gilbert apparently realised he had gone too far by being aggressive towards *Feliciano*. Matthew lingered off to the side with the glass of water in hand as he tried to figure out just what the problem was.

Gilbert didn't like his grandfather, for some reason. It seemed to have been an ongoing thing that didn't just occur in the past 24 hours. Thought *that* event might've made things finally explode.

"We assure you-" Gilbert's grandfather continued in his unwavering authoritarian voice, "Surveillance measures will be furthered-"

"Are they just sucking up cus they lied all this time?" Alfred sneered as the Chief continued to openly list the police's plans. "Like, they fucking lied to us and the whole-ass public and look what

fucking happened!"

"We will be changing our approach. If this killer won't back down then neither will we," The Chief added. "We refuse to be intimidated by this *terrorist*. We are looking into reorganizing the police and securing more funding to improve and protect the city. There's a lot of developments to look forward to that are in discussion-"

Gilbert kept making noises in place of words, likely curse words, to show exactly how he felt while watching the broadcast. How he felt about his grandfather. He tore a hand free from Antonio to grab another pillow and ditched it before his friend restrained him again.

So Ludwig was in the same profession as their grandfather and Gilbert was not. Gilbert had not heard from his grandfather at all since the event last night. Was he upset for that last reason alone?

A reporter asked if the police were confident in the curfew and naturally, the Chief of Police exuded that confidence.

"The curfew comes into full effect in a few short hours and it is pivotal that the city complies during these trying times. Anyone found on the streets during these restricted hours will be spending the night in jail and risking fines. Consider this as the motivation if your safety is not enough."

The Chief then began ranting, proclaiming not a single person would fall victim under these circumstances and Matthew just had to wonder how the police could sound so sure... It was almost like the challenge was being dangled right in front of him. Daring him to find a way around it like he'd done with everything else that had come before. Matthew imagined that after last night, the surveillance would be more extreme than he could imagine. He'd certainly have to be careful as he became comfortable with the new status quo... wait.

Maybe that's what the police wanted him to think, that this was a challenge and taunt him with it. He wouldn't be surprised if Ludwig had been conspiring with the Chief. From his limited knowledge of their relationship, it seemed quite plausible. Plus Matthew had to factor in the profile Ludwig had made and how accurate even the draft had been. Matthew would have to think about how he would react to this news and do the opposite because he did *not* want to be played again. His first thought had been 'how will I get around this' so clearly the police were expecting him to adjust just like that. If he couldn't resist it and went out wouldn't he be giving into their bait? He refused.

Matthew mulled it over as he thought about it. He could just lie low without pushing the limits. The urge inside him was satisfied and if he wasn't hungry, why eat? Especially when the meal could be *poison*. He didn't *need* to challenge the curfew because he already got what he wanted and he'd won this battle. The Trail Killer had been launched into new heights of fame than he ever imagined and now *everyone* feared him. The heavy news coverage would give him entertainment for a long time. This wouldn't be going away anytime soon either. The public would be constantly wondering about the investigation and the police would constantly be giving updates. Since the police were so insistent on being vocal *now*, they would keep bringing up their every intent to catch him and the cycle of infamy would continue.

Matthew could be patient and just enjoy the new stage he set because he was *satisfied*.

"Are they *fucking serious*?!" Alfred practically growled. "The Trail Killer won't give a shit about a stupid curfew! Fuck! Can they *actually* stop this *asshole*?!"

Exactly, the police were trying to goad him into breaking the curfew and Matthew would never make a mistake if he could help it... Alfred on the other hand. Alfred just risked unwanted attention and Matthew really hoped his brother would know when to quit. But he also knew better than to place faith in hope because despite what he wanted, Matthew just had a feeling that like always, his brother would swing the other way.

Because fancy criminal profiler or not, Alfred just knew what the killer's first thought was going to be. Too bad he didn't consider a second thought.

"What makes you think the killer would go out after this?" Matthew gestured to the madness on the TV. "This is a bit... extreme. Surely the killer wouldn't be so stupid to go out after this is announced and get caught?"

"Surely the killer could see the odds were stacked against him now," Kiku spoke up with a calculating look aimed at Alfred.

"Yeah! They just need to scare the killer to make him stop, right?" Feliciano choked out.

"This shit won't scare him! It's a killer!" Alfred stressed. "One that won't stop until stopped so it looks like we're gonna have to keep going out because the dumbass police can need all the help they can get. What do you guys think?"

Alfred glanced at Antonio and Gilbert who had mixed expressions from the multitude of emotions haunting them.

"Fuck yes!" Gilbert rapsed out and Matthew was really surprised. He would've thought that Gilbert would at least have some hesitation after Ludwig told him off and told him *not* to do it and then died. But Gilbert wasn't exactly smart.

"I won't let you guys go out alone-" Antonio was cut off by a desperate Feliciano.

"NO!" Feliciano's voice broke in desperation and was flinging himself again. "You guys can't go out! Please don't! What if you- You can't- What if you get killed?! Please don't!"

Kiku said nothing but his eyes raked over everyone as he weighed up the conversation.

"No. You're right Feli, we can't. We won't." Alfred's eyes met Feliciano's he bit his lip. "Don't worry about it, we won't. We're just scared cus that killer won't stop and it's not fair. I said that without thinking."

Alfred met Antonio and Gilbert's eyes.

"Right guys? We're just saying this because we're upset. We're not actually gonna do it. Especially since it's *illegal*, y'know?"

Gilbert should be used to his voice failing him by now but despite it, he tried to argue with jerky gestures and broken noises that communicated his feelings of 'no, we NEED to go out' very clearly. Alfred turned his urgent eyes to Antonio and after a shared look, Antonio whispered into Gilbert's ear, making the latter change his tone and give in. Gilbert's voice gave in and so he just nodded vigorously to make up for his voice and Antonio looked down with shame.

"No, we won't. We have no intentions of breaking the curfew, Feli," Antonio reassured.

Matthew just knew what they were thinking. They were so predictable and so stupid. He actually felt an urge to try and curb their behaviour.

But that was a thing of the past... the old Matthew used to feel the weight of other people's actions and now if he did anything he'd feel bad for giving in.

"Good, there's no need for you to go out," Matthew made his tone sound relieved. "The police probably expect the killer to keep going out and this is their plan-"

"Fuck! What?!" Alfred cursed. "So this is all a big mind game?! A-fucking-gain?!"

Gilbert's face lit up and he jolted like he had been struck with lightning. His eyes were alive as an angry smile crossed his face.

Matthew internally sighed. That was supposed to deter them! They were supposed to just believe that the killer would be stupid enough to go on the streets where they'd inevitably be caught without their interference! And then believing that would make them feel better and none of them would have the urge to play vigilante for the foreseeable future and risk the full force of the law coming down on them!

"Gil? Please don't- you won't actually do it, right? Gil?!" Feliciano trembled.

Gilbert's face looked like he wanted to be angry at Feliciano and lash out at him, but was barely resisting and barely hiding it. When he didn't answer right away, Feliciano lunged himself at Gilbert and latched onto him while pleading.

"He won't! I won't let him! Gil's just saying that because, well, we all want the killer to pay, right? Don't worry, we'll all feel better after a couple of weeks," Antonio said as he rubbed Feliciano's back.

Gilbert hugged Feliciano back tightly to comfort him and try to convince him.

"But I don't want to feel better!" Feliciano cried as he clung to Gilbert and no one knew what to do about that besides let him cry it out. *Then* Matthew passed the glass of water to Antonio, who passed it to Feliciano and tried to soothe him.

"I'm gonna check in on Ivan," Alfred said as he fished his phone out and began typing. Matthew just knew that was code for finding out if Ivan's seen this update too and was on the same page as the group.

Everyone watched in silence as the news looped the same stuff from lunch. Despite already seeing it, Matthew was more than happy to watch it for a second time. Though he let his eyes stray to the side to try and catch a glimpse of Alfred's phone and see Ivan's response, but he was too far away to make out the words in the text bubbles without leaning and having someone's attention turned to him. But he did have a feeling that Ivan was very much on board.

His view was obstructed anyway when Gilbert jumped up with a rough intake of breath and jerky movements, pushing Feliciano off and into Antonio. Alfred went to question what was going on but Gilbert just forcefully snatched the remote from his friend's hand and turned the TV off with a grunt.

Gilbert sort of shifted on the spot as he ran his hands from his face to through his hair over and over.

"Maybe we should all go to bed, it's been a long day?" Alfred suggested.

"Good idea! I'm very tired, aren't you amigo?" Antonio grabbed Gilbert's hand to try and grab his attention. Gilbert sneered at the friendliness before his face twisted further and his hands tensed in his hair.

Alfred bit his lip as he glanced between his pairs of friends. Kiku had a hand on Feliciano's shoulder as Feliciano clung to him on the couch. Gilbert and Antonio looked like there was a silent conversation passing between them.

"You guys get comfy, I'll getcha some blankets and pillows and shit and you'll sleep like kings!" Alfred shot some finger guns at Kiku and Feliciano before looping his arms around Gilbert and Antonio.

"Come on-" Alfred's smile dropped when Gilbert brushed him off and began pacing again.

"I'll look after him," Antonio reassured.

"No, I'll help," Alfred insisted. "Mattie, can you grab sleepover supplies for Kiku and Feli?"

Alfred didn't wait for a response as he turned his focus back to dragging Gilbert to his bed.

Matthew couldn't help but notice how his brother's attention was split and ever since he got home he was jumping from task to task. Hopefully, he appreciated Matthew being there but Matthew doubted it.

Considering they weren't draining bullies, Matthew didn't mind helping out Feliciano and Kiku so he found some blankets and pillows. When he brought them over he saw that Feliciano was crying again and clawing at Kiku, was who doing his best to comfort his friend despite the beads of tears forming in his own eyes.

Matthew went to find them a box of tissues after lowering the lights. Being sympathetic to other people's problems was a well versed skill. He couldn't say he didn't understand what they were feeling, he just couldn't feel it for himself. Which made sense, because Ludwig wasn't *his* friend. Feliciano, Kiku and Ludwig had been really close and made for a strange but somehow fitting close knit friend group. On the bright side, at least Feliciano and Kiku still had each other and should feel better with time.

Matthew had to wonder if he had someone he was especially close to, how would he react if they were taken away? He imagined he simply wouldn't allow that to happen.

With that thought Matthew made the connection to why everyone was ready to disregard the curfew. He understood it and what they were feeling, they were driven by desperation. Maybe it wasn't *that* stupid after all. Well, it was definitely stupid logically, but through the lens of being overwhelmed by their desperate feelings, it somehow made sense.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew had to admit, he found it a little awkward sharing a bed with his brother. They both lay in silence, aware that the other was awake but treating them as if asleep while trying their best not to move and breach the other's space.

A couple of times Alfred would have a moment of restlessness that inspired him to jump from the bed and pace the room. Sometimes he'd turn towards the door and wave his hand like he was considering leaving the room, but then he'd shake his head and continue to pace.

The first few times that happened Matthew would ask what was going on or if Alfred was okay. He tried to reach out and let his brother talk but each time Alfred would just brush him off and get back into the bed. At some point, Matthew gave up and let his brother continue the cycle. There was nothing to ask when there was never an answer. Why would that change now after so many years...

So Matthew rolled with his back to Alfred, shutting his eyes and trying to sleep. It didn't come to him. He knew his brother was trying to be quiet but Matthew could hear his clothes rustling as he paced and occasionally muttered.

"Fuck, it's only 11:15? Fuck this," Alfred murmured and sighed. At least that served as a timestamp for when the drama kicked up barely a moment later.

Alfred jerked when a ringtone blasted through the house followed by a loud and concerning thump as if something had been pelted at a wall. The ringtone continued, cutting into the silence of the night.

"What the fuck?!" Alfred ran from the room and to the source of the sound, which was his own bedroom. Matthew jumped up to follow because if something was happening he wanted to be in on it and have all the benefits that came with being so close to his secondary victims.

"-I know, just let me do it- I can-" Antonio was saying as he pushed Gilbert off him, who was swiping for what was presumably his own phone and presumably someone he hated on the line by the way he was aggressively giving the phone the finger to make up for his lack of voice.

"Hey, what's happening?" Alfred addressed them both as he tried to neutralise Gilbert with a bear hug. "Bro, just chill and let Toni explain- Oh shit Toni your hand!"

"It's fine," Antonio dismissed even though thin lines of blood were trickling down his arm because Gilbert's phone screen had shattered and was now digging into his hand. "It's his Grandfather-"

Gilbert made an ugly growling noise before his eyes darted past everyone and landed on Feliciano lingering behind them, widening with conflicting turmoil.

"Amigo, I'm going to answer-"

Gilbert tried to fight Antonio for the phone but Alfred was stronger. Then Feliciano started crying about how they shouldn't be fighting because they're friends while Kiku handed him a tissue and

pulled him back.

"I'm gonna go in there," Antonio chuckled nervously as he slipped into the living room and Alfred held Gilbert back.

"Dude, it's probably important so just let Toni take it. You can't talk anyways so no one can make you talk to him."

Gilbert just slumped with an ugly face and Feliciano ran to start a group hug. Matthew edged away to be out of sight from the doorway as he listened to Antonio pick up, doing his best to tune the others out so he could hear the call.

"Hi, it's Antonio! Sorry if you were waiting, we were asleep-"

Antonio seemed to cringe when he was cut off.

"Oh, sorry, Gilbert can't speak right now-"

It wasn't on speaker, so Matthew would have to try and work it out from half the conversation.

"He's not asleep! He just can't speak at all. He lost his voice...."

Matthew didn't know what Gilbert's grandfather would want to speak to him about, but he got the impression that the Chief was persistent. Something Matthew already knew and something the Chief shared with his grandsons.

"Right, sorry... sir." Antonio's shoulders slumped. "I can pass on a message if you'd like me to?"

Antonio looked like he was floundering, like he understood the conversation as much as Matthew did. But he still persisted.

"We're not there, we're staying with a friend, sir."

"Because he didn't want to stay there without.... um," Antonio hesitated, and Matthew knew why. He was unsure if it was best to say Ludwig's name at all and risk emotions, or be condescending and not be abrupt. Matthew could pick up on Antonio's dilemma because it was something he'd been forced to consider so many times before and he could walk a mile in anyone else's shoes while his had never been broken in.

"-Ludwig, sir."

"Sir, it's just me, Gilbert and Feliciano staying-"

"Man, this asshole's a real hardass like, Toni's trying to help him and he's just flexing by making him call him 'sir' and shit!" Alfred muttered as he leaned by Matthew, eavesdropping as Antonio paced while holding a bloodied tissue to his hand.

Matthew thought his brother was just saying it for the sake of saying it, ranting to himself as he often does so Matthew didn't bother to reply to the shared sentiment. Gilbert's Grandfather sounds like the kind of man Matthew would hate to be exposed to and resent for being treated like such. Matthew already resented him for the media blackout stunt, but now he could see that the man just thought himself superior and was comfortable treating others however he liked.

"With Alfred, sir," Antonio looked both exasperated, intimidated and entirely exhausted as he sent an apologetic glance to Alfred, who had snapped up when he heard his name.

"Alfred Jones."

"What the fuck?" Alfred muttered. "What's with the fucking interrogation?"

"He can't come now-! Uh, sir, it's late and there's the curfew-"

"No, please, uh, I think it would be best if he slept tonight-"

"What is this?" Alfred sneered. "Fuck, are these guys fascists or what? Is that asshole gonna just make people come to him whenever he wants?! What would he even want Gilbert for anyways?! To actually make sure he's alright? As if."

"I know, sir, we can come to the station in the morning?" Antonio sounded like he was pleading as he continued to pace, one hand covering the ear not to the phone as if to block Alfred out. Alfred continued to rant under his breath and Matthew tuned him out too.

"Well I think that Gilbert could use the support so I should go. Sorry, sir, could you tell me what you wanted him for? Did you have some kind of breakthrough-"

Antonio went pale as he listened to the Chief of Police talk on the other side of the phone.

"I was there so uh, I suppose I'll need to come anyway. If you'd prefer, I could just tell you about it now-"

"Okay, yes... sir."

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow sir. Goodb- ah, okay. He hung up."

"What's the fucking deal with him? He's acting like a real asshole," Alfred commented. "Toni, tell me everything, what the fuck was that about?"

"Maybe he's grieving, you know how much he loved Ludwig," Antonio shook his head and Alfred huffed at the statement. "I wish..."

"What?" Alfred asked.

"I don't really know," Antonio chuckled as he gingerly put Gilbert's phone down on the kitchen bench and grimaced at his hand, spurring Alfred to snap his fingers off before running off.

"B-R-B, I'll get some bandaids." Alfred ran back in a second later and offered them to Antonio. "Good thing they were already out, huh?"

Matthew watched as Alfred helped stick them on his friend's hand and continued to listen as he lingered. Trying to figure out what the Chief of Police, Gilbert's grandfather could want him for. Alfred would probably want to know too, so Matthew figured it was just a matter of waiting for his twin to ask before trusting Antonio spilled.

"Lucky us," Antonio chuckled. "I wish I could drink."

"Yooo same but absolutely not," Alfred jokingly wagged a finger in front of Antonio.

"Maybe give Gilbert something, it might help his throat."

"Press X to doubt," Alfred laughed. "No one's touching the good hard stuff while we're having this sleepover."

"It would help with what I have to tell him," Antonio disclosed with worried eyes glancing at Alfred's door.

"Yeah, he's really not gonna be happy about having to go to the police station for some reason. What's the reason?"

"I wish I didn't have to tell him..." Antonio's lip wobbled. "I think you'll have come with us."

"For moral support? I'm all on it dontcha worry."

"No, amigo... Ludwig called us last night."

Oh, the call. Matthew didn't react outwardly, his face stayed exactly the same but inwardly he knew he shouldn't be surprised. If they were investigating Ludwig then *of course* they'd check his call logs. But they didn't have a time stamp for when he died, because Matthew had taken all the cameras from the car and they only had an estimate from an autopsy-

The shop camera footage. That would narrow it down for sure. If Ludwig was alive when the call ended and dead when the car crashed, it would give the police a window. A small one.

So what? He shouldn't overthink it. *Couldn't*. Matthew had to have faith in himself that he cleaned up well enough.

"Shit, that," Alfred's face became serious and he hunched forward. "Yeah, you know I know about that. So is it just like... protocol? Or something? Did they just get around to checking Lud's phone records-"

"No..." Antonio looked guilty for cutting Alfred off. "He called us right before he... you know. Apparently moments before. So the Chief wants to talk about that."

There it is. Even if it was just protocol, they would've noticed eventually. But if the Chief knew it was moments before then they already had their window. So was the rest just protocol? Was the Chief just trying to find *something, anything* he could use?

"So just before he *died*, he called Gil? Shit, I knew he called at some point but *what the fuck? Fuuuck*, is Gil gonna be okay?"

"Probably not."

Matthew tried to mentally go back to the call and remember the details but he didn't think there was anything that could give the police more clues. Whether the police thought that was a different story. *Shit*, now he was overthinking it.

"What if we just didn't tell him? Cus he already knew he called but he doesn't have to know that it was *right* before? I know it's lying but it's good lying."

Someone brushed past Matthew, making him flinch while Antonio and Alfred jolted when Gilbert suddenly appeared and shoved a phone in their faces.

"Ah fuck, I'm not wearing my glasses," Alfred muttered as he squinted at the text Gilbert was trying to show them. "Fuck, why do I have to be defected? Hang on I'll just squint harder-"

"'*What did that asshole want?*'" Antonio read aloud before glancing away guiltily. "He wants us to come into the station tomorrow. To interview us."

Gilbert began hastily typing.

"'*Is that fucking it why would he call in the middle of the night with the personal number if it's going to be about shit like that when he could just text or wait until the morning fuck him*'"

"That's a good point, why couldn't he do that?" Alfred scoffed. "Dude only cares about one thing, huh?"

"Maybe he forgot what time it was? The police have been working hard?" Antonio cringed with a conflicted look as he sighed and turned to Gilbert. "He knows Ludwig called us."

Gilbert looked disgustingly angry as he began pacing and pulling at his hair.

"It's just standard stuff, *right*?" Alfred shrugged. "Protocol and all that. Chief Grandpa doesn't *know* what the call's about so you don't have to tell him that Lud somehow figured out you were doing illegal shit."

Maybe it was protocol, or it was trying to piece together a picture of the night. The police would be looking for details that Gilbert or Antonio wouldn't think twice about because they didn't know the significance of them. Matthew relaxed because there were no details. He couldn't remember the call beat for beat, but he could remember the feeling afterwards that everything was still going to plan.

He just had to trust that.

"Then we'd be lying amigo, I don't know if that would actually be helpful..."

Gilbert was typing.

"'*Opa CAN'T know what we were doing*.'"

Gilbert's look of desperation was sad. Matthew watched with morbid interest. Why didn't Gilbert want his grandfather to know? Probably due to their obviously strained relationship, right? That and the man was the Chief of police. Regardless, Matthew had never seen Gilbert desperate like this before. It was entertaining.

"Look, just twist it a little bit," Alfred said with a confident smile. "You've got until tomorrow to work out what you're gonna say and since it was a personal call it probably wouldn't be too helpful."

"Ah, I'm not sure how much we can lie about amigo... I think you'll need to come with us because it was about you."

Right, Matthew gave that a second thought.

"What?! But Gilbert said-!"

"It... after everything that happened... it just kind of slipped from my mind to tell you that Ludwig knew what you were doing," Antonio said apologetically.

That could be a problem.

"He *knew*?!" Alfred balked, a hand flying to his hair and tugging as eyes went wide. "*How*?!"

"I *don't know*."

If they didn't know, neither would the police and then they'd know to focus on that angle. Who knows what they could analyse and profile from that.

Gilbert was shoving the phone in Antonio's face with a steady hand.

"'*Let's just go through what we need to say and work it out*.'"

"Yeah, maybe I can figure it out from what he said to you," Alfred stated. "Tell me the truth first and we'll figure it out."

Matthew wasn't surprised that Alfred would lie to the police, but if the police didn't know he was lying then they would assume that the Trail Killer would have to be someone who knew Alfred personally and prompted Ludwig to look for him, right?

No, that was only if they knew the Trail Killer was with Ludwig *before* the call, when his last known priority was searching for Alfred. Matthew *knew* the call wasn't suspicious so hopefully the police would assume Ludwig came into contact with him *after*.

Matthew wasn't the only one straining himself to think it through, Antonio was pacing with exaggerated hand movements as he furrowed his eyebrows in thought.

"We were on Gil's bed when Ludwig called. He was really worked up and he wanted us to prove that we were home," Antonio began, "Gil didn't take him seriously at first but I did because I could hear he was upset and I asked him what was going on... did he say nothing? Or maybe he just dismissed my question?" Antonio winced in frustration as he tried to remember. "Wow, this is hard to remember...it was very stressful..."

"Well yeah, a lot's happened," Alfred brushed off sympathetically. "Just keep thinking."

"After sent him our locations, he said it was because he knew we were acting as vigilantes and he told us just how disappointed he was. I know Gil was upset after... But he also told us that he knew you were out and that we weren't allowed to contact you to warn you. He was really... well, he was upset and he said he wasn't going to let you off this time."

Actually, if the police were as thorough as they pretended to be, they'd realise that Alfred had a warning for being caught acting as a vigilante in the past. *Perfect*. Even if Alfred lied, even if the police believed that lie or caught it, it would still give Ludwig a motive to search for Alfred on his own accord.

"Wait, do you think he saw me?" Alfred questioned. "Because if he did then that would explain how he *knew* but if he saw me wouldn't he have gotten out of his car to actually catch me? I don't get it. Why was he hunting *me?*"

Alfred was pacing and raking his fingers through his hair with a tensed jaw.

"Even if he knew I was out why wouldn't he assume I was with friends or something? ...Unless he knew where all my friends were but if he threatened everyone not to call me at least one person would've, y'know? So what gives? How would he know that I wasn't home?" Alfred was scrambling to make sense of it. Matthew just hoped the Chief would assume that Ludwig had spotted Alfred somehow.

"Maybe he stopped here?" Antonio suggested.

"Oh shit! Maybe he did!" Alfred whipped around and his searching eyes landed on Matthew. "Mattie! Did Ludwig stop here last night?"

"No, I was home alone all night," Matthew said helpfully as he was supposed to. The words came easy and would never be contested. "Nobody came over."

Ludwig had no reason to come here, not until Matthew had given him a reason to find Alfred. By then, it was too late for him and Matthew could personally guarantee that Ludwig never stopped by.

"'*His cruiser would show where he went if he did come here*'" Antonio read what Gilbert typed.

"Oh yeah, good point- maybe that's why your grandpa wanted to know my full name-!"

"No, he was going to send a police escort here to take us to the station," Antonio chuckled. "He really wanted us there, *tonight*..."

"Oh, well, okay then, back to scheming," Alfred dismissed. "Is that the full story?"

"He hung up after that," Antonio confirmed and wrapped an arm around Gilbert. "Sound about right?"

Gilbert shrugged as he typed, then tension in his scowl contradicting the carefree attitude he was trying to pull off.

"'*I can't even remember most of the day which isn't very awesome*'"

"Sheesh, good luck to us tomorrow," Alfred sighed. "So I think we should obviously keep our breaking the law part to ourselves and say he was just searching for me because he cares about me as a friend or something."

To the Chief, that would definitely read as Ludwig thought Alfred was out playing vigilante again.

"Obviously, we'll keep the part about not knowing why he was searching for me because I wanna know why and it could actually be important to the investigation or whatever. But you guys..."

Alfred tapped his lips impatiently as he paced and hummed.

"What kinda excuse... maybe he wanted your location because he forgot if you were going out that night or not? Or he was just really paranoid? I don't know," Alfred sighed roughly. "Something like that where the angle is that 'he cares' and so we don't have to tell the scary Chief of Police that we're *naughty naughty* criminals, y'know? The police obviously don't know that he was searching for me yet or I would've been pulled in ages ago... or he would've said I should come too. So I guess they don't know enough yet. What a surprise, the cops don't know *shit*."

"I guess that'll have to do," Antonio yawned. "We can revise it in the morning."

"Yeah we'll put something together in the car, don't worry, I believe in us!" Alfred waved a hand as he yawned too. "Now how about we get y'all back into bed? I'll tuck you in if I have to."

Matthew watched as Alfred dragged his friends into his bedroom and Kiku and Feliciano emerged when Alfred came out and carefully shut the door.

"How much of that did you hear and will you snitch?" Alfred couldn't hide his guilty expression as Kiku stared at him.

"I couldn't hear much over Feliciano," Kiku replied.

"Sorry!" Feliciano wrung his hands together. "I don't mean to be such a crybaby..."

"Well, I cried a lot when Arthur died so I'm not going to judge," Alfred gave Feliciano a hug. "Plus I have plenty of tissues and pasta so just help yourself!"

Matthew couldn't say he remembered Alfred crying much. At the funeral he seemed happy to be surrounded by friends and the only moment of weakness that Matthew knew of was when his brother did everything he could to keep Matthew from finding out that his own cousin was murdered. Did Alfred have more moments that Matthew didn't know about? It was possible and frustrating because wouldn't Alfred assume that Matthew was hurting the same? Alfred didn't do anything to help Matthew, his only show of caring was the backwards attempt to spare his feelings by keeping Matthew in the dark...

But Alfred had lied to Feliciano before to keep him happy. A prime example was just a few hours ago when he told Feliciano that no one would go hunting for a serial killer. So it was possible Alfred was just saying that to cheer his friend up.

"No, I think I should try to sleep... it's what Lud-" Feliciano started tearing up again and Kiku led him to the makeshift living room bed.

Matthew took his thoughts to his bed.

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Alfred was just as restless as the first time they tried to fall asleep and if Matthew wasn't accustomed to sleeping so few hours then he might actually be annoyed.

After a fit of tossing or turning from Alfred that really tested Matthew's patience, Alfred sighed and broke the silence.

"Do you think it's kinda my fault?" Alfred whispered.

"What?" Matthew prodded. There were a lot of things Alfred could blame himself for so he'd have to be more specific.

"Ludwig dying."

What? Matthew supposed that was a conclusion Alfred could come to. But since when did Alfred ask Matthew about sensitive things? Probably because he was wildly insecure and he *needed* something, from *anyone*. That was why he was talking to Matthew about his problems now.

"No." Matthew asserted. He didn't know why he answered helpfully. Maybe because with enough time Alfred would stop having those thoughts and move on like he always does. He wouldn't really blame himself. So it didn't matter anyway.

"Well, as long as Kiku doesn't blame me because I can tell that everyone else doesn't. Do you think if Kiku knew Ludwig was looking for me he'd blame me?"

"I don't know." Matthew didn't know Kiku well enough but if no one else was blaming Alfred then he seriously doubted Kiku would be the first. Alfred was too well-liked to suffer from the consequences.

"Well, fuck. That's just great."

"Does this mean you blame yourself?" Matthew pressed, testing the waters. His tone didn't reflect it, but one could assume it was because he cared and wanted to help.

"*I don't know*. I'll figure it out."

They didn't speak for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah I know all this eavesdropping is so convenient but Idk how to communicate plot information of other characters any other way in a 3rd POV limited sort of way. At least this eavesdropping is less of a stretch than the others.

Also! I think I might change to update weekly for a bit, just as a treat. I have a few chapters saved and maybe I'm just a little keen to add them in...
I've got a big plot point (well, a few but there's a brutal one) I'm working up to and it's going to be evil >:)

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew wondered just how many hours of sleep he got last night. Whatever the answer was, he doubted Alfred slept even less. Matthew was awake when his brother got up with an inconsiderable loud sigh. Not wanting to miss out on anything, Matthew followed *quietly*, because it wasn't hard to be considerate.

There wasn't much to miss at the moment. Alfred's door was shut with no noises to indicate if anyone was awake and Feliciano was asleep on the couch tangled up in a blanket. Only Kiku sat on the floor by Feliciano with his expressionless eyes fixated on his phone. Seems like he didn't sleep much either.

Alfred didn't notice Kiku was awake and instead just grabbed the carton of juice from the fridge, popped the lid and drank from it. Matthew quietly sighed behind him. Apparently, that was enough to get him noticed.

"Oh, are you cooking breakfast now?" Alfred spoke as he swallowed and put the juice back. Matthew's eyes followed his brother's hand.

He had lost count of how many times he had told Alfred not to do that - drinking out of the shared cartons like that. Now he felt like he had the right to get confrontational and if he didn't say anything it was because he was willfully being a coward! All Matthew had to do was just point out that the glasses were right there and Alfred had no excuse, and then when Alfred argued back Matthew just needed to double down and *hold*.

But those points were overshadowed by Alfred's question. Alfred's tossing and turning all night must've gotten to Matthew, that had to be the reason why he wasn't endlessly patient with his brother like usual. Like expected.

"Do you want me to? I thought you would because you know what your friends like." Matthew didn't explicitly argue but he was ready to. Alfred was a bully for expecting him to cook every day and couldn't even organize breakfast without him. Alfred was so dependent on him, always taking and taking until Matthew had given up every ounce of his flesh and Alfred was still hungry. Soaking up everything Matthew had to offer until Matthew had nothing left.

"I can just tell you what my friends like," Alfred argued and started opening cupboards. "What do we even have, anyways?"

Matthew had to get out of there. *Now*. Before he was expected to *serve*.

"I don't know, just look around," Matthew wasn't about to list off options like a restaurant menu and shut himself in the bathroom.

Being passive-aggressive felt good and getting his way- or at the very least *not* being used felt good. Maybe he should just start cooking for himself again. But then Alfred would just argue that Matthew should double what he cooked. Matthew stared down his reflection in the mirror as he

thought about what he could say to counter that because he needed to be prepared. He needed an iron defence that not even Alfred could argue with.

But Alfred would anyway, that was the problem. Because Matthew would fold after being pressured and pestered. Or, he used to. He felt like it would be different now, even if confrontation didn't work, he wouldn't feel guilty about finding a sneaky way to win.

Why did he feel helpless, even now? Why couldn't he just have the strength of a normal person to demand he be treated right? Probably because normal people, people who *weren't* him, got treated right just off the bat. They never had to prove, earn or negotiate their worth. It wasn't fair.

Matthew couldn't help but mourn his reflection in the mirror. He had spent so many years worrying about the boy in the mirror and now he had to remember that wasn't even him anymore. But he still felt echoes of that past pain, so clearly it wasn't so easy to leave himself behind after all.

Really, it felt like he was being dramatic for no reason. He liked fresh meals, that was why he cooked every day. If he was cooking already then was it really that hard just to double the recipe of whatever he was cooking?

His face snarled back at him.

Yes. It would be. Why can't he feel that way? Why wasn't he allowed to make demands too? People thought he was weak but when he was put into these situations where the only acceptable response was to *comply*, of course he seemed like a weak-willed pushover.

He just wouldn't comply. It didn't matter how he went about it, as long as he looked out for himself.

Matthew didn't want to be annoyed. He hated feeling like this especially with everything paying off! He should be happy but once again it was his brother ruining things by being obnoxious.

There was knocking on the door and Matthew jolted. His eyes bored into the door, angry at whoever just sent that shock through him.

"Dude, can ya hurry the fuck up! I need something in there," Alfred whined.

There was that sense of power once again and Matthew let out a breath. He was in control. Not only just of himself.

"Give me a minute."

Matthew forced the tension from his body. He wasn't going to stop himself from feeling anger, but hot wrathful anger was risky. He needed to be cold and calculated. That was the anger that kept his head on his shoulders and him safe on the streets.

He wasn't going to just come out of the bathroom *now* because Alfred asked him to. Matthew was going to wait a while and let his brother *squirm* because his twin needed to learn he didn't always get everything *when* he wanted, and Matthew wasn't always going to give it.

So Matthew waited a couple of minutes and practised keeping his face blank in the mirror before he stepped out.

"What were you doing in there? Building the bathroom?" Alfred grunted as he brushed past. Probably for the best before Matthew said something confrontational, his tongue was posed and

just waiting to say something snide. However, it didn't escape his notice that what Alfred said was something Arthur used to say. He wondered if Alfred was aware of it too.

Kiku was now standing by the kitchen counter and staring into a mug of something that looked like tea. It seemed like Alfred had at least figured out that much when it came to entertaining guests. Then Matthew spotted a box on the bench.

Alfred never drank tea, no matter how much Arthur tried to pressure and persuade him into it. Matthew didn't drink tea either, so Kiku must've brought the teabags. For Matthew, Arthur was synonymous with tea so that would explain why Alfred had their cousin on his mind, consciously or not. But it was the first time in a long time that Arthur was on Matthew's mind too, and he found himself reflecting on his actions.

Did Matthew kill Arthur too hastily? Maybe he should've made Arthur one of the later victims so Matthew could reveal himself as the Trail Killer once he had already built the name up and *then* revelled in Arthur's reaction. That would've been *beautiful*.

Matthew squeezed his eyes shut and let it go. No one is an expert at something new so Matthew would just have to forgive himself for not knowing better. Arthur's dead now, and that is fine. He enjoyed it at the time and how could he regret that? He could replay Arthur's fading eyes in his mind whenever he liked at it was nice.

But there was something else. When he first started out all of his kills and chosen victims had been known to him and he took delight in giving them what they deserved. It had been so long since he had killed someone who was put in front of him by the universe.

Maybe he just evolved. He knew he was more reaction-driven now than personal-grudge-driven like before. But it still would be nice if he had the opportunity again to kill someone who had wronged him in the past. At least back then there was *passion* for killing. Right now it was just a matter of expertly slicing a stranger's neck and marking their forehead before moving on.

Ludwig was right about him escalating.

When Alfred came back out he still looked exhausted.

"We'll just have food on the road or something," Alfred announced to Matthew before bursting through his door. "Get up guys we gotta go to the station. We'll have a meeting in the car and get fast food or something with a drive-through."

Upon hearing Alfred's voice, Kiku snapped out of his intense focus on the mug.

"Uh," Kiku tilted his head at Matthew... who just knew his name was forgotten. "Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks," Matthew said quickly. "Did you bring that over?"

"No, Alfred found it." Kiku's fingers played with the tag and spoke distantly. "It was Arthur's favourite."

Oh, Kiku knew those were Arthur's favourite and said it like it was obvious. Matthew could never understand just how well-connected all these *normal* people were. All of Alfred's friends were one big group and they had no room for anyone else.

"Alright," Alfred snatched their attention as he jangled his keys. "We're gonna- oh wait I just had an idea!"

A tired Gilbert and Antonio loitered beside Matthew, who had no problem being close to them. Alfred quickly grabbed a mug and a new teabag.

"You can drink this, I dunno if it will help but I can't hurt," Alfred exclaimed as he poured a new mug of tea. "Arthur was always going *on* about the benefits of tea, just drink it and maybe it'll help."

Alfred shoved the mug into Gilbert's hand.

"Lets-a-go!" Alfred stopped again to pivot towards Kiku. "You guys can eat whatever leftovers you can find in the fridge I guess, I dunno what's in there but I'm sure there's something. Anyways, you're in charge! Ka-Ciao!"

Alfred grabbed to pull his friends as he made for the door. "Now come on, we gotta figure out where we're getting breakfast from!"

The volume of the house dropped when the front door was shut.

"I'm going to check on Feliciano," Matthew settled on saying.

"He should still be asleep. Now that he's deep asleep nothing should wake him."

Matthew just nodded.

"Let me know if you need anything then..."

Usually, at this time he'd be by the TV eagerly waiting for the news to start, but he couldn't do that with Feliciano there. But Matthew could just find news articles online and visit the news websites, which was all he wanted to do. It made him paranoid to think that something was happening about the case and he didn't know about it because he wasn't on top of the news. He wanted to know everything that was being said.

He sighed and relaxed his face as he shut himself in his room. Now that he was alone, he didn't have to be 'Matthew' with the face tightly coiled with worry. The bed was still unmade and the house was quiet like there weren't any guests at all. Matthew made his bed before sitting and searching on his phone. The news wasn't anything new, but Matthew still sat through every minute of it. He was about to browse the rest of the internet for entertainment when he heard soft noises coming from outside the room and decided there was something more interesting than the internet's ongoing reaction.

Matthew was a little bit annoyed that Alfred put Kiku in charge. Partly because Alfred put *Kiku* in charge (instead of Matthew who lived here?) and partly because why did Alfred think he was the boss who could delegate power? His brother had always been bossy and what was worse was people went along with it.

Matthew shook it off. It didn't really matter. He got what he wanted and nothing could ruin that. Plus he had the additional bonus of company in the house, two people who were close friends of his latest victim. Matthew couldn't ask for much more and was happy things had played out as they did. He didn't have any plans today but he found himself hoping that Alfred and the others were

gone for as long as possible. He liked Feliciano and Kiku. He never had anything against the latter, not when Kiku was always mindful and respectful, never actually doing anything to use or hurt Matthew.

So Matthew really didn't mind being nice to them and helping them still got him what he wanted, feeding into his thrill so it didn't feel like it obligation.

Matthew stepped into the living room to hear Feliciano insisting that he was fine with a chipper voice and despite Kiku's blank face, he didn't really seem to believe it.

"This is a sleepover, right?" Feliciano said. "We should do sleepover things... like watch movies and have fun?"

"If that's what you wish," Kiku hesitated.

"If you want to watch movies I know Alfred has every streaming platform ever on the TV?" Matthew offered.

Again with the overhelping... but he didn't mind it. His earlier annoyance at Alfred left when his brother left and now he was just in polite company still revelling in the bliss of his achievements. If anything he was helping *himself* by engaging with them in any way possible and revelling in the thrill.

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Eventually, Feliciano insisted on cooking which led to Kiku and Matthew helping out in the kitchen. Feliciano kept insisting to try and turn it into a nice sleepover and by cooking 'something nice' he'd be able to cheer everyone up.

He really seemed a lot like Antonio in a way, and a lot like 'Matthew'. Only everyone rightfully loved Feliciano, who knew it.

It was late afternoon, the three of them were on the couch watching a movie when the front door opened and the peace of the house was disturbed.

"What up guys? Did I miss anything?" Alfred said, voice flat as he tossed the car keys on the kitchen bench. Because of the force he tossed them with and the bench being smooth, they slid right off and clattered on the floor. "Fuck, that's my thirteenth reason."

Antonio pulled a face at Alfred, one of both disapproval and understanding. Gilbert didn't seem to hear.

Matthew immediately raked his eyes over everyone for clues.

Gilbert had been crying, his face was twisted up in anger and his body was tense. The tears were fresh and Matthew wondered if there was an episode in the car. Antonio was practically glued to Gilbert's side with a pained look of frustration and worry. All of them looked like they needed another 24 hours of sleep.

"Not really, we've just been watching movies - oh! And we cooked-" Feliciano went into a rant as he jumped up to skip over to the fridge and grabbed what they had made, intent on sharing.

"What about you guys, are you okay?" Matthew batted the ball back into their court as he and Kiku joined them in the kitchen.

Antonio shook his head like he was hoping no one would ask, making it obvious it was for Gilbert's sake.

"Fuck no, a whole lotta shit happened but do you actually wanna hear all about it?" Alfred remarked as he helped himself to some food.

"Yes! What happened?" Feliciano basically threw himself at Alfred.

"Yeah I know you wanna know but do you *actually* wanna know-? Never mind. Of course you wanna know." Alfred sighed deeply like it was a huge obligation, which made Feliciano frantically apologise before Alfred quickly cut him off.

"No, uh, I'm just tired and it's a whole lot to repeat so I'll tell you in a minute. You gotta know anyways... Thanks for cooking though!"

Once everyone had a bite to eat and Alfred shoved another cup of tea into Gilbert's hands, everyone was standing around in the kitchen with varying levels of anticipation.

"I don't think we were supposed to repeat it," Antonio chuckled humorlessly.

"He didn't say *not* to," Alfred shrugged. "Besides, who cares? It's not gonna get out anyways."

Gilbert made a gesture of agreement with an annoyed face, the annoyance coming from whatever happened at the police station.

"Is your grandfather okay?" Feliciano asked timidly and whimpered when Gilbert rolled his eyes.

"He's doing fine, amigo," Antonio put a hand on Feliciano's shoulder. "He's working hard to catch who did this and Ludwig will get justice."

"Yup, even if he has some fucking wack ideas about how to do it," Alfred added. "Anyways, we got a lot of dumb shit to tell and I dunno where to even start."

"How about chronologically?" Kiku suggested and Alfred nodded with consideration.

"Sounds good. So on the night that Lud... died... he actually called Gil and Toni cus he thought they might not be home and so he called them and made them give him their locations. The Chief wanted to know everything that happened during that call just in case it helped the investigation."

Gilbert's face was fucked up and Matthew just *knew* that Gilbert knew *when* his brother lost his life. Matthew didn't even know if it was necessary for Gilbert to know yet someone told him regardless. Was it the Grandfather? *How cruel*.

"Did it help?" Kiku asked.

Alfred waved his hands around unsurely.

"Maybe," Antonio replied. "Because Ludwig was looking for Alfred... well, no one knows why he was looking for Alfred but we know he didn't find him and Al never saw Ludwig..."

"Yeah, we don't know how long he was looking for me either but now we *do* know that after that call... uh," Alfred was hesitant to say it. "Yeah, the killer found him just after that call so the cops wanted to know if he said anything that could help or hint that could help pin the killer..."

Feliciano had a distraught look on his face but was focused on holding onto Alfred and Antonio's every word.

Antonio wrapped an arm around Gilbert and pulled him in as he murmured something to him. Likely something that was supposed to be reassuring, but Gilbert didn't want to hear any of it. Just glaring at the floor. It looked a little bit funny when he was holding a dainty teacup, reminding Matthew of Arthur.

"Anyways, yeah so we told them everything about that but I don't know if it actually helped," Alfred sighed.

"It might have. The Chief figured that the killer must've done something that *wasn't suspicious* to make Ludwig pull over." Antonio insisted with positivity.

"Yeah, wanna hear the worst theory that dumbass had to say?" Alfred sneered. "Chief thought that maybe that fucker looks like me and that made Ludwig pull over and that's how the fucker got in the car."

What? Matthew's fingers twitched at that and he shoved them into his pockets. sure, that was *a conclusion* to come to but it was all *circumstantial*. It didn't actually mean anything and the police should know better than to make assumptions unless they were just that desperate. That had to be the case because it just didn't make sense. It was good they wrongly assumed that he got into the car *after* Ludwig called Gilbert but he could've pulled over for *any* reason. Why couldn't the police assume that Ludwig could be baited? Or maybe it was because Ludwig would've called it in, right? That's why it wasn't suspicious otherwise Ludwig would've notified someone, right?

Matthew didn't know what to think. He just needed more information. What else happened at the police station?

"He was in the car... when it happened." Kiku's face was stoic and Matthew would've found it just a little bit amusing how far behind everyone else was if he wasn't holding on for learning more. Now he was just annoyed that Alfred hadn't told him everything already.

"Yeah, apparently they could tell cus..." Alfred couldn't say it so instead he made some insensitively descriptive motons that made Feliciano's tears spill over. The boy was still determined to ignore them but did nothing as they cascaded down his cheeks.

"But I think that theory's fucking stupid," Alfred grumbled. "Because Ludwig knows me and Ludwig wasn't a fucking idiot who's fucking blind!"

Suddenly Gilbert was snatching everyone's attention as he held out something he typed on Antonio's phone.

"Yeah exactly. It's a stupid and *insulting* theory," Alfred remarked after reading.

"What does it say?" Feliciano hiccuped as he kept swiping at his eyes. "I can't read it..."

"'Opa is fucking stupid and if he really loved Lud so much he wouldn't think of something stupid because he always said how smart Lud was.'" Antonio read for him.

"Yeah, it's stupid because I dunno why your Grandpa doesn't get that me and Lud knew each other so he would've known that it wasn't me and wouldn't have let the guy get into the car with him!" Alfred was almost shouting. "It's so fucking stupid! It doesn't factor in that other shit might've happened like what if he pulled over for some other reason that wasn't that he *thought* he saw *me* or for someone else or, fuck, I dunno!"

"I'm sure the Chief would've considered that amigo," Antonio tried to pacify. "You're just getting caught up on some speculation. I'm certain he just said that out loud to consider that maybe at first he had found you and pulled over and *then* the killer talked his way into the car? It was just a theory because all the Chief knows is that the killer had to have distracted Ludwig somehow from his search for you to get into the car... and Ludwig would've have pulled over without calling for backup if it was *his* choice to pull over, instead of being called over."

"Yeah and the top theory of 'distraction' was someone who he could somehow mistake for me was walking around and when Lud pulled up this guy cottoned on real quick, like unrealistically quick and-" Alfred rubbed his hands together to give everyone the picture of just what this opportunistic killer was thinking. Matthew morbidly could see the humour in it because that's exactly how it went down.

"Like, seriously?" Alfred continued. "It's fucking dumb and means they're stuck on assumptions. There's gotta be other ways this guy non-violently baited Ludwig to pull over for him and then get the drop on him."

Exactly right. Matthew was biting the inside of his cheek as he listened to everything that was being said. Surely the police could come up with other ideas to explain how the Trail Killer got into the car. Hopefully, they convince themselves of a better one than what was almost the truth.

"It's just a possibility they need to consider," Antonio said again. "I'm sure it might help if they rule it out."

Matthew had to consider just for himself that it really was simply said for the sake of considering an option and *not* the lead the police were leaning on Alfred was acting like they were. But he had to agree, Alfred was right about it being stupid. What could the police do with that information and how could they even prove it? It was dark and maybe Ludwig was just pulling up to anyone on the street to make sure they weren't Alfred despite whether they resembled his twin or not.

Maybe the police were just overthinking it because they were desperate to add to their profile? That had to be it. If they thought the killer looked like Alfred then they'd have race and age along with any features he shared with Alfred... like hair, glasses, demeanour...

"Did anything else happen?" Kiku asked, completely unphased by the way Feliciano's hands were twisting into his sleeve for support.

"Yeah, just you wait until you hear what else this dumbass Chief has in mind- I can't believe that guy's in charge of keeping us safe," Alfred glanced at Gilbert. "Full offence."

Gilbert scowled in agreement.

"Maybe I should break it to him," Antonio glanced between Alfred and Feliciano and Matthew tried to anticipate what was going on. It couldn't be that something worse had happened, right? Because Ludwig was already dead, so what more could hurt Feliciano?

"What happened?" Feliciano said with an intake of breath.

"Nothing!" Alfred went to reassure. "Well, Toni will tell you. It's about Lud's funeral."

"Oh, right. Okay..." Feliciano was still apprehensively nervous. "What about it?"

"The Chief wants to talk to you at the station. We said we'd bring you around later so we can go whenever you like. But... we can tell you what it's about now."

"You're just making it sound more scary by edging," Alfred remarked. "Basically the Chief wants to make his funeral this whole big thing and have it open to the public for anyone to come pay respects."

Matthew's eyes lingered on Alfred. That sounded... tempting. He would love to go to Ludwig's funeral but he had a feeling that just like the curfew, there was a catch. Surely it was all just a move to try and catch him. Something in the funeral must be to get a response from him and try to control how he acts. Still, Matthew wondered if there was a way around it. If the funeral was streamed as everything these days was, then surely he could just watch it from the safety of his home and once he came across the *thing* that the police would put in there to tempt or taunt him, he just didn't react to it because he'd be expecting it.

"But Lud would've hated that!" Feliciano made a shocked noise as clutched to Kiku harder.

"Yeah it gets worse," Alfred chuckled dryly. "It's not going to be streamed or nothin' but it's gonna get put on blast through the media leading up to it so expect to hear about it 24/7 because they wanna advertise it as much as possible."

Oh, there was the catch. Matthew withheld an annoyed sigh. To attend the funeral everyone had to go there in person. He needed to know more now and bit the inside of his cheek as he waited for Alfred to *spill*.

"But why does he want to talk to me?" Feliciano's voice trembled.

"Because-" Antonio was interrupted by Gilbert slapping his arm and shoving the phone in his face. Antonio grabbed the phone but continued talking. "Because the Chief wants you and Gilbert to uh, be involved."

Antonio gave Feliciano a sympathetic look and turned to Gilbert's message.

"'I'll tell him I'll only do it if you don't have to do it cus he's an asshole and he said it would be great if my voice didn't heal so I'd sound more raw.'"

"Yeah that was fucked up," Alfred muttered. "Thank fuck he isn't my grandpa. Full offence."

"He was just thinking pragmatically," Antonio remarked and even Matthew was getting annoyed with his optimistic Devil's Advocate. He didn't like people who defended assholes. But he did like that this Grandfather was an asshole to Gilbert.

Feliciano just looked distressed and confused which made Alfred sigh.

"Fuck it. He wants you and Gil to cry on stage at the funeral and beg for Ludwig's killer to turn himself in peacefully," Alfred sounded like he was about to roll his eyes at any moment now. "Then when the memorial is built he wants you two to embarrass yourself again if it didn't work the first time, but then it'll be streamed to the entire nation so everyone can see the memorial! So there's that."

Feliciano made a noise that instantly told everyone how he was *not* into that idea. But Matthew wasn't caught up on that, he wanted to know exactly what the Chief was planning because it seemed like Alfred had more to say.

"What do you mean if it doesn't work the first time?" He questioned. "What is he trying to make them do?"

"Surely he has something in mind to ask for such a big favour," Kiku added.

"Yeah, apparently hyping the funeral is meant to inspire the killer to come visit the funeral and then when Ludwig's loved ones beg on stage we'll get a reaction."

"Yes, the memorial monument will be will up soon and the Chief thinks that if you two give a statement and make it personal the killer will visit," Antonio further explained, eyes full of pity turned to Feliciano. "I'm so sorry amigo."

"Yeah after Gil and you cry at the memorial and it's put on blast through every media ever, they're gonna stake it out because apparently the killer's gonna wanna visit. Something about the sick fucker thinking it's fun and too tempting but wouldn't the trail fucker know that? Maybe my brain's fucking rotted but I just can't trust the cops! I just can't!" Alfred insisted.

Gilbert huffed in agreement.

If Matthew worried about his stream of law enforcement information being cut off once Ludwig died, he was thankfully mistaken. As long as Gilbert could be used by his Grandfather and Alfred was verbal about his disapproval, then Matthew could always stay one step ahead. He had to admit, visiting the memorial would've 100% been something on his 'to do' list if he saw Gilbert break down on TV... it was scary to think that he might've been caught so easily.

But he would just be content seeing Gilbert break down on TV and he couldn't wait to see it, along with the frustration that came after when the Chief's efforts yielded *zero* results.

Maybe he could attend the funeral because he knew the others would go regardless of their official involvement or not and if he were one of their friends then of course he'd come for support. It gave him a plausible reason for being there, didn't it? And if it came down to getting a reaction when Gilbert and Feliciano gave scripted eulogies through tears, Matthew knew his acting skills were top-notch. He would be fine.

"'Fuck doing what Opa wants I want that bastard killer to get ripped to shreds on the street the cops would just put him away and protect him in prison.'" Antonio read when Gilbert thrust the phone into his hands.

"Yeah, can't hurt him in prison," Alfred muttered.

"But at least if he gets caught then he'll be stuck in prison and he can't hurt anyone else! Isn't that what Ludwig wanted?" Feliciano whimpered. "I'll meet with the Chief and do whatever he wants

because I need to do it for Lud..."

Alfred sighed but didn't say anything as he hugged Feliciano.

"I understand your feelings," Kiku stated as he turned to Gilbert. "But Ludwig would prefer lawful justice as opposed to karma. If you want to honour him then we should do all we can to help the serial killer be arrested."

Gilbert sneered but turned away, seemingly in agreement with what his brother would want. It seemed to hurt him, but he nodded and typed:

"'I'll do the stupid funeral begging thing but I won't change my mind about other things.'"

Matthew raked his eyes up and down Gilbert. That statement could just imply that 'other things' was Gilbert still wished for the Trail Killer to get beaten up, but he could tell from the way Gilbert glanced at Alfred and Antonio that the truth was they were still very much on board with going out hunting at night...

Matthew would have to keep tabs on that. He doubted they'd go out so soon, especially when so many people were staying here and they were trying so hard to keep Feliciano and Kiku in the dark. But he knew it was only a matter of time.

Chapter End Notes

I should probably say this now as a disclaimer for future chapters, but I don't hate any of the characters. I love them all they all make hetalia special. Their bad traits are just played up for the fic. You'll know it when you see it, and yes this applies to the upcoming big bad plot point later.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first couple of days of the curfew were interesting. But to be fair, Matthew found the whole concept interesting simply because he was *invested*.

For the first couple of days, nothing happened. The city's inhabitants waited in bated anticipation as if something sudden and big would happen, and it was inevitable. The police and media were *hounded* for more information by the public - a majority terrified and others morbidly interested. Though, as soon as Matthew turned to the internet the percentage of those morbidly interested increased tenfold. It made sense when anything else off the internet had to be presented with more sensitivity and seriousness, so naturally, the online environment was much different.

Because of the internet, the Trail Killer was trending for all the expected reasons and unexpected. Even with Alfred's guests still camping in the house, Matthew spent a lot of his time engaged with his phone to the point of addiction and concern for his eye health. True crime was trending with no indication of slowing and wherever he looked there were discussions of all kinds about the Trail Killer or the curfew. It was exhilarating and Matthew hoped it would never stop.

As promised, news of the upcoming funeral was everywhere and you'd have to truly live under a rock to be oblivious to it. With so many people talking about it and seemingly planning to go, Matthew felt confident in his decision to go. After all, he had this uncanny ability to be overlooked by *everyone*.

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Matthew had showered at breakfast to avoid being made to cook, an easy task to avoid when Feliciano enthusiastically jumped to offer his culinary help at every opportunity with Antonio right behind him. As far as Matthew was aware there was nothing on the agenda for today so he was caught off guard when Alfred, Antonio and Kiku were getting ready to leave.

"Where are you guys going?" Even if he wasn't going to get an answer he refused to train himself into being silenced. He wasn't going to be 'Matthew'.

"Shopping and errands and shit," Alfred said, sounding annoyed at being questioned, his tone suggesting *again*. "We'll get back when we get back, just keep everyone happy for me alright?"

Matthew internally scowled at having that tone directed at him and his eyes lingered on the door even after they had left. Keep everyone happy? Was that just what he was born for? That was all he used to do and now it ruined him.

Matthew also felt a pang of annoyance because he could just tell by how Alfred was acting that he was lying. It wasn't just his acting, but the excuse was weak - Matthew was the one who did all of the shopping. If he didn't do it then it wouldn't get done. So he knew that Alfred was doing something else, but he couldn't think of what. He didn't care to deduct it now when he could check Alfred's location later. Right now Gilbert was lingering behind him and Matthew internally raised an eyebrow when Gilbert scoffed.

"This is not at all awkward, it's so un-awesome I've gotta be babysat because I know that's what you're doing!" His voice is raspy and almost a whisper but better than when he first arrived.

"It's not that bad!" Feliciano said as he hovered around Gilbert. "We could do something fun!"

Ever since coming here Feliciano hadn't been alone and was always hanging off someone. Matthew just hoped Gilbert wouldn't be an asshole to Feliciano about it because this would be the first time the two of them would be alone.

Well, alone plus Matthew.

There weren't many activities to choose from to begin with, but since Gilbert was low on energy and supposed to be recovering from exerting himself with grief, he agreed to let Feliciano put a movie on. It took until Feliciano turned on the TV for Gilbert to snatch the remote with the explanation that it should be him who got to choose what they were watching.

Matthew was sitting on the couch with them and looked up from his never-ending scrolling of the internet to keep an eye on the situation. If Gilbert gave him an opportunity, Matthew would *finally* exercise his bark. Something he'd be in the right to do socially if it meant standing up for poor Feliciano.

But Feliciano seemed all too happy to let Gilbert do what he wanted and bounced his legs as he waited, meaning Matthew wouldn't have an opportunity for conflict. Eventually, Gilbert settled on something, Matthew didn't care for what it was. He had his phone, *plus* Gilbert and Feliciano for entertainment.

Gilbert couldn't concentrate on the movie and at some point, he gave into whatever he had been silently debating to ask Feliciano.

"Hey Feli," Gilbert tried to clear his throat to fix the raspiness but it didn't work. "How do you cope? Cus you lost Lovi... and now Lud's gone... so how do you deal with just not having a brother anymore."

There was a tense silence where even the movie playing in the background felt like it was intruding. Matthew was waiting for Feliciano's answer, even if he didn't know if an answer was coming or not. Feliciano was completely still and either contemplative or absent.

"I don't..." Feliciano whispered. "I can't... I don't know, I'm sorry..."

"Well, that's just fucking great!" Gilbert threw his hands up with a shout. Then he snatched a nearby pillow and smothered his face into it as he screamed.

"Please don't do that Gil!" Feliciano's voice was raw as he tugged at the pillow. "Please! If you want to know what helps, just imagine what Ludwig wants you to do and then do that!"

"So what? You just *imagine* what *your brother* would want?" Gilbert growled and threw the pillow to the side. "How the fuck does that help?!"

"It doesn't!" Feliciano admitted. "It just doesn't hurt because if I don't do things that would've upset Lovi then I'm not hurting myself."

"Just say you don't have any fucking advice," Gilbert grumbled, his knuckles white as he balled his fists, distorting the pillow.

"I'm so sorry Gil, nothing's ever going to be okay. I just listened because Antonio said it and I wanted to make him feel like he was helping but I don't think I can be helped..."

Gilbert huffed in agreement. Matthew kept his eyes on his phone as he listened in. Surely one day they'd be okay, but maybe right now it was easy to believe they wouldn't be.

"I can't be helped either," Gilbert disclosed, his voice barely audible. "I'm going to be fucking stuck like this forever."

But then again, Matthew knew what it was like to be irreversibly broken and ruined. Maybe they'll never be okay, but that was okay. They were still better off than Matthew had ever been.

The couch shook with the force Feliciano threw himself at Gilbert, latching his arms around him and crying into him. Gilbert hugged him back tightly.

"Ludwig loved you a lot! I know he did!" Feliciano insisted. "He'd want you to get better!"

"Well, I can't get better until the asshole that did this knows what it feels like."

"Your Grandfather will catch him and then we'll be okay and no one else will have to get hurt anymore!"

Matthew had to wonder how much Feliciano believed in his own optimistic preaching.

"Ludwig would want you to be okay too," Gilbert said with a faraway look and ironic chuckle. "He'd want someone to look after you..."

A look came across Gilbert's face as he debated saying something else. He gave in.

"Feli, our families are fucked up and we're both missing brothers. How about I be your brother and you be mine? Ludwig loved you a lot so I love you too and if I wanna *honour* Lud..."

Gilbert looked like he was strangling Feliciano with how tightly he was hugging, but if anything it looked like Feliciano couldn't be hugged enough. The latter was grabbing at Gilbert like he was holding on for dear life as he tearfully agreed to the strange arrangement Gilbert had suggested. Though Matthew supposed it only seemed strange for him because unlike these two, he still had his brother. If only physically... emotionally was another story. He wished he could understand what they were going through but it all felt like some kind of production instead of emotions he could understand.

But still, he had to admit it was a little moving and Matthew was happy for Feliciano. Maybe not so much Gilbert, Matthew just hoped that he wouldn't drop the ball with this new arrangement and hurt Feliciano.

Matthew used the lull in conversation to check Alfred's current location, which was pinging where Gilbert lived. He wondered what Alfred could be doing there. Maybe Antonio needed something? But why lie about it? Going through Alfred's location history Matthew could see they never stopped at any stores, only going straight there.

What did they intend to do?

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When Gilbert paused the movie and awkwardly pried himself out from under a clingy Feliciano, Matthew waited until he heard the bathroom door lock before he struck.

"Are you feeling better today?" He asked, catching Feliciano's attention.

"Yeah, only a little bit," the Italian chuckled, "but I just keep myself distracted."

Matthew nodded.

"That agreement you made with Gilbert..." He started slowly, "Doesn't that make you feel like Lovino's being erased?"

Feliciano swallowed and sunk back on the couch.

"Not really?" He uttered as he wrung his hands together. "Cus... he'll always be my brother and I'll always love him... and..."

"What about Ludwig?" Matthew asked. "Doesn't that mean Gilbert's erasing him?"

"No!" Feliciano shook his head, his hair flying around him from the force of it. "No! We'll never forget Ludwig! I just want to make sure Gil's okay because Lud would want him to be okay!"

Matthew started to feel like an asshole as Feliciano went into a defensive and sad rant that ended with him staring somewhere past Matthew which made him think that Feliciano was arguing more with himself than Matthew at this point. Matthew cringed and grabbed onto Feliciano's shoulder's as he tried to calm him down.

"Sorry," Matthew really didn't mean to make Feliciano upset. "Sorry, I was just..." *asking because why*? Because somehow, it bothered Matthew.

It was because if that had been Alfred he wouldn't even hesitated to replace him. That was why.

And if Alfred had been the one to die, Matthew would've felt so guilty at even trying to find comfort for himself when he'd know Alfred's friends were suffering too. Somehow 'Matthew' felt second-hand guilt from witnessing Gilbert and Feliciano's agreement and Matthew wanted to tear his hair out because he couldn't help but feel the echoes of 'Matthew' screaming.

Worse, was how he always came to find out that he was wired *wrong*. Of course he thought of it, but Feliciano who was *normal*, hadn't. Normal people didn't think the way he did or feel guilt for those sorts of things yet here Matthew was once again realising in all the ways he was messed up. The only thing he felt guilty for now was not realising that normal people didn't think like that and now he put those thoughts into Feliciano's head! Unnecessarily.

Matthew should've shouldered the guilty thoughts, so no one would have to. Typical, but why should he suffer? He couldn't help but feel conflicted and Matthew bit his lip as he twisted his fingers in his hair.

"What happened?" Gilbert croaked as he came back in.

"He feels guilty," Matthew explained, catching how Gilbert's eyes jumped to him because apparently the albino had been asking Feliciano and not *him*.

Whatever, at least Matthew could still articulate words. Words that he would have to use to get Feliciano out of the mess he created. Matthew continued to rub Feliciano's shoulder as he and Gilbert made a common enemy out of Feliciano's demons.

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Alfred, Antonio and Kiku came back way later than they should've, walking through the door just before dinner. Alfred and Kiku were in the middle of an argument about who should use the shower first, subverting Matthew's expectations because Alfred was actually arguing for Kiku to use it before he did. There had been a couple of instances when the twins were growing up when Alfred had shoved Matthew out of the way in order to get to the shower first and Matthew thought he could still see a faint outline of a scar on his forehead from when Alfred shoved him into the doorframe once.

Back to the current day, Alfred won the argument by making a big show of pushing up his sleeve before manhandling his friend into the bathroom and pulling the door closed. Matthew didn't think poor Kiku deserved the rough treatment.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Gilbert demanded, obviously suspicious about what his friends were actually up to all day.

"Don't talk amigo," Antonio fretted as he went to fawn over Gilbert. "You need to save your voice!"

"Opa would prefer I sound like shit, *remember*?" Gilbert coughed dryly and his angry face morphed into a wince.

"Yeah but it hurts you to sound like shit," Alfred argued. "Also Toni, you're showering next."

Matthew glanced over them and noticed they all looked dusty and covered in splotchy stains, maybe like they had been cleaning... There was Matthew's answer. Alfred had let it slip in a text that Gilbert's place was a mess. Pair that with Gilbert's cuts and bruises, it suggests Gilbert trashed his own place.

"You don't have any shopping with you," Gilbert said, accusatorial.

"Oops, left it in the car," Alfred explained. "But we did some other errands and we had to stop by Kiku's- we did a lot of stuff but it doesn't matter cus we're back now and you're well rested, right?"

"At least it looks like Feli is," Antonio smiled as he pulled the curtains to keep the last of the daylight from shining onto Feliciano as he dozed peacefully on the couch. At least it was peacefully, Matthew was thankful he was able to undo the damage and convince Feliciano that his new brotherhood with Gilbert was really sweet. And it a way it was.

"Wait, this is perfect," Alfred glanced between Feliciano and the bathroom door, a grin forming as he listened to the shower running. "It's scheming time."

Having caught on, Gilbert leaned forward with a tight toothy grin and Antonio sat beside him as Alfred paced in front of them. Matthew was still loitering around and he figured that his brother just had a massive blind spot where he was because shouldn't Alfred have noticed that Matthew was still around?

No, Matthew knew it was he just wasn't threatening enough. Alfred thought he was on board so why keep it from him? Matthew would never get in his way...

"So, I don't think we should go out until we know the shit the Chief wants to do *hasn't worked*," Alfred suggested. "Cus maybe it will work and then we won't have to do anything risky, but if it doesn't work we'll know about it because the police are into *not* lying to the public anymore... *for some reason* now."

"Why the fuck should we wait?" Gilbert croaked. "I don't care what happens to me, I can't just sit here and do nothing!"

"Dude, why the fuck are you saying that?" Alfred stressed. "It's risky cus if the police catch us not only are we gonna get in trouble and gonna get locked up so we can't go out later, but your Grandpa's gonna find out and I just know you're not going to like that!"

Gilbert pulled a hateful face at that idea, seemingly realising the stakes of getting caught.

"I just need Ludwig's killer to pay," he grunted. "I don't care how risky it is. Even if Opa's trying some unawesome plan I still want to try and find that asshole my way."

"I won't let you go out amigo," Antonio said softly and Gilbert narrowed his eyes at him.

"You actually think you can stop me?" Gilbert cackled.

"No, Toni, we can't," Alfred looked pained like he agreed. "But really none of us should be going out so what's the point in trying to stop each other? I mean yeah, we could cope in normal and healthy ways but we're too fucked up and stubborn, right? I'm just saying we should wait a little bit-"

"What if that asshole kills more people?" Gilbert barked sharply. "What if while we're waiting for Opa and the police to catch him, he *doesn't* get caught and more people die because we didn't try to catch him ourselves!"

"Gil-" Antonio was pale and Alfred looked constipated, like he agreed too much but still felt the need to argue against it. Matthew thought that Alfred was a hypocrite because he was going to go out, regardless if his friends waited or not.

"Yeah, I really feel that," Alfred said. "Fuck it, we'll have to organise it all later and talk to Ivan. Ivan's pretty much on board and said that even with all the shit going on, nothing's changed for him."

"What a surprise," Gilbert rubbed at his throat. "I know I shouldn't complain because the more the better, but I just hope he doesn't find that asshole before I do."

"Yeah me too, only cus I want that fucker alive enough to rot in prison," Alfred laughed.

"I'm sure Ivan will hold back," Antonio said dismissively as he glanced at their sleeping friend. "But whatever we do, we have to keep it from Feli. The last thing I want to do is upset him..."

Gilbert and Alfred agreed with silent nods.

"Okay, so how about we get through the funeral first then," Alfred murmured. "*At least*..."

Eventually, Gilbert reluctantly nodded and they stopped talking. But Matthew knew the subject wasn't over. Not until they were out there once again.

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When Matthew couldn't sleep, he thought. Alfred was asleep beside him, having adjusted to the new bed after the first eventful night. He was peaceful when asleep and Matthew found he didn't mind him much then. When it was late and quiet, it left a lot of room for possibilities of what could've been. Imagination ran wild and an old Matthew might've been brought to tears about what he'd never get.

But now Matthew didn't like thinking about what kind of life he could've had if he had been accepted from birth and embraced by the village. So he thought of other things.

He would've liked to keep souvenirs of his victims but he found his memories to be enough. Replaying them over and over, he was content with everything he achieved. But despite that content, there was always room for imagination. Just to entertain the thought, Matthew was always thinking about the Trail Killer's next move and what opportunities lay ahead.

It would seem that doors of opportunity had been slammed shut in his face because of the curfew, but Matthew knew better. He just wondered why the police didn't.

Once the ideas started flowing it seemed obvious. There were ways to get around the curfew without actually breaking the curfew. Have these so-called 'best and brightest' police officers forgotten that Arthur was murdered around lunchtime? Admittedly it was in a secluded area, but it was the middle of a bright and sunny day no less. Police can't enforce a full-day lockdown...

Never say never, perhaps they could. Who knew how the Chief would escalate. The idea of forcing the Chief to escalate was really tempting though and Matthew figured that if he made another move, that goal would be in the back of his mind.

Maybe Matthew could make it hard to tell when someone had died... but with technology and scientific knowledge nowadays it would be impossible to trick the police. He couldn't assume that they were stupid. He considered putting the body in water but that would still reveal the time and day of death. The only thing that would accomplish would be delaying when the body was discovered...

Oh, that's an idea. Matthew bit his lip as he considered killing people during the day and leaving the bodies in water to be discovered at night. It would certainly mess with the police and send a strong message about just what the Trail Killer thought about their curfew.

But then he saw the fatal flaw and his inevitable downfall. The police would certainly catch onto the new MO and would pay more attention to all available bodies of water... If the police didn't do anything to indicate their change in attention and Matthew went to dump a body, he could get caught. The plan of using water was too easy to turn against him. He tensed his jaw in frustration before sighing and sinking back into the comfortable covers.

What was he getting worked up for? These were just ideas but still it felt like there was no right answer. He had to remind himself that there was no pressure to act just yet and he had plenty of time to brainstorm. Who knew what grand idea would hit? There was no forcing explosive inspiration.

If anything, he should be thinking pragmatically. Matthew needed more information and should consider how things have changed on the streets. Maybe, since Alfred thought he was on board with them going out at night, he'd just ask Alfred about the conditions he noticed because of the curfew. If Matthew phrased it as concerned and scared, maybe Alfred would tell him what he wanted to know because he thought he was helping and playing the hero by comforting him with information.

Yes, Matthew would do that once he knew Alfred was going out again. Leaving the police to squirm with inaction first added to the thrill because he knew they'd be feeling the anticipation. Everyone was and everyone was waiting to see what would happen. Sure, there would be a reaction if *after* all these measures taken by the police, nothing happened... but Matthew wanted to think of the next 'explosion' because, after everything it took for him to get all eyes on him, he really didn't want to leave anyone disappointed.

But for now, he'd just think about it.

Chapter End Notes

Things start to get back into action next chapter with the funeral >:)
Also, the beginning of the big plot point starts at the funeral (not exactly the beginning but the foreshadowing/setup?) somehow, I tried to be really covert about it but it'll make sense once things make sense. Make sense? Anyways, save your theories for what I'm planning after the funeral... it'll be interesting to see what parts are suspicious or not

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew wasn't complaining in the slightest, but it had been a long week. No one had left the house except for when Antonio wanted to go to Church. Matthew still found it flattering that he had such an effect on Antonio, who apparently hadn't attended MASS in years until he thought an angel talked him down from jumping that day. Matthew had to say, he was somehow thankful that Antonio was doing much better, all things considered.

Apart from that, not even Alfred left the house and any errands or chores of his just got lumped onto Matthew, because as always the obvious solution was to just make things Matthew's problem. He was always there when Alfred needed him. Matthew wanted to say no and see what would happen, but he knew Alfred would just be insistent and even though giving in to his brother's desires made him feel like some kind of puppet... Matthew still did it knowing damn well Alfred would never do the same for him.

But Matthew did get something out of it. Not only did it get him out of the house, but he also got to see how greater society was coping with the new status quo. Plus it gave him the opportunity to buy newspapers which were full of new discussions daily, giving constant updates from the professional end. Now he had a paper advertising Ludwig's big funeral sitting in his drawer along with every other highlight from his career.

Matthew enjoyed the extreme contrast between the professionalism of new outlets and the internet, which had crazy theories coming in and crazier individuals. Or they were just shitposts. Either way, entertaining.

23.4K

Why I think the Trail Killer started(r/TrailKiller)

NamezNotInOrder

I think this guys delusional somehow, maybe schizo like that guy from California who knocked on peoples doors and thought he'd die if he didn't drink blood. So maybe this guy has to drink the blood of his victims to survive. But that's just a theory, a conspiracy theory!

15k comments

blorb012.8k points

Yep, I'm sure that's 100% what's going on here. That would definitely explain why this guy chooses people on the dirty streets instead of going house to house

LigatureChoke11.6k points

Maybe it's a matter of availability cus pretty much everyone locks their doors now so there's no breaking in

DelusionalDenmark9.1k points

Would also explain why he's so hard to catch because schizos are just the best at planning illegal activities /s

KobraCrab3.1k points

Hey, if women can do anything, so can schizos

Cloud_Cats8k points

...not even in the same category buddy

thereisanontherone12.1k points

You know that the police never actually said anything about blood drinking right?

DeadViolinist11.3k points

Unless that's what the police want us to think!

RushAmy11.2k points

I'll test it by walking the streets with a piece of garlic I got from the store and if I update in a day then this guy is definitely a vampire

Pan_American2.4k points

Remindme! 24hours

ExtremeEscalation7.4k points

Mods can we pretty please with an egg on top get better flairs? I'm kind of sick of seeing joke posts. I definitely get having a sense of humour but this is just dumb..
.

NordicNerd7k points

Yeah I second this because I joined just to get updates

PuffinPuff6k points

I don't mind jokes about serious/dark topics but I prefer my sense of humour to have some intelligence

18.3K

What kind of profession would the Trail Killer have?(r/TrailKiller)

FuckFavouritism_69

We live in the 21st century where you can't assume anything anymore, so what if the killer is actually an escort? It would have to be someone who knows the streets well and doesn't stick out in the nightlife scene so what if it is an escort? Man or woman doesn't matter, I know it's most likely to be a man and the police use male pronouns, but what if 'he' is actually a 'she?' Women have a lot of reasons to want to kill people let's be real.

9.7k comments

MissingFriends11.4k points

Ngl if she's actually a killer I wouldn't even be mad

unfair_upbringing10.1k points

Yeah it's all dudes who died right so if she is an escort I'd assume they deserved it somehow

DrowningPool_Bodies9.2k points

Don't say any of that irl or you will get punched

axeman9k points

dude that sounds a lot like victim blaming bruh

NeglectedMistreatment8.3k points

This is just wishful thinking which is fucked but because we're talking about a serial killer here

BandwagonCopyCat8.1k points

We need another *another* subreddit because I just wanted to find some morbid memes instead of this

fanficfan6.3k points

Mods are making flairs apparently. A little overdue considering how big this sub has gotten

TeaLover695.3k points

Yeah we need one for updates, one for discussion, one for memes and one for shitposting

FirstAustrianPianist4.3k points

the four horsemen of the apocalypse lol

Okay, admittedly Matthew scrolled for hours and these were just a sample of the posts to highlight a point and that point was there were some people who were just stupid but wildly entertaining.

Maybe his sense of humour and attention span was just broken...
Besides, there were a lot of posts about just general discussion.

26.9K

How long can the police actually keep the curfew going?(r/TrailKiller)

graveleaklocation

7.1k comments

09classistfan15.7k points

As long as they consider the Trail Killer to be a threat I guess

LimblessCorpse14.1k points

They've declared a statewide emergency so until they say there's no emergency

JapaneseKatanaKing13.7k points

I bet all the night shift workers don't know whether to laugh or cry

hunter_now_hunted_50states11.1k points

they'll cruagh?

killing_for_clout9.3k points

Cons; out of work. Pros; don't have to go to work

24.5K

Does anyone else feel like the police are really pushing the funeral?(r/TrailKiller)

SnakeWrangler96

I'm still planning on going though. But every time turn onto the news if it's not about the case then it's about the funeral. I know this'll sound mean but the guy's already dead. Of course he should be buried and have a funeral but does it really need to be that big when there's other things they could be doing?

9.5k comments

NealyDeadAlbino10.4k points

It's probably for morale or something

MistakenForTheFrench9.9k points

I'd say it's to reassure the public that the police are taking it seriously

StolenGun7.4k points

But they have to take it seriously. This investigation is the biggest thing to happen in this city so they'd be feeling the pressure now

FrameBrother_07047.1k points

of course they're taking it seriously one of theirs is dead

brokenstrings46.9k points

That's the only reason it got big to begin with and why the police chief cares so much. People have been dying this whole time and the police never commented. My brother was one of them and he only died a few weeks before that cop and the media wouldn't report on it at all

MorbidInspiration3.3k points

geez that's fucked i'm sorry for your loss

22.2K

What's the most disturbing Trail Killer fact?(r/TrailKiller)

PersonalGraveyard

6.7k comments

DanishDem0n14.2k points

That his method of random kills is what's stopping him from getting caught.

NoEmpathyAllThrill13.5k points

And freaking everyone out because anyone can be a target and anyone could have bad intentions. Crazy that we would never know a stranger's intentions until it was too late Edit: A word

HungarianHouse13.9k points

Proabbly that because this guy can blend in, we've passed him a couple of times and never knew

horrorsofman_4213.5k points

We don't even know what his personal criteria is for choosing someone to kill

CantGoBackk13.4k points

I'd say that the guy has a functional and normal life.

GardenSkeletons12.8k points

That's what a good 70% of the comments are. I guess people don't like to think about how deceptive someone would have to be or the fact that you can't tell just how insane they are

LimblessHack12.1k points

On the other hand, apparently there's a lot of stories of people around serial killers claiming they felt something 'off' about them from the start

irrational_fear_for_brother13.7k points

The disturbing part was probably the police choosing to keep the true victim count from the media to prevent a mass panic

ColeyOurQueen13.4k points

That statistically, this killer was a victim of childhood abuse and was never rescued from that living situation. Of course that's never an excuse but does explain how someone could decided to do something so horrific

ForeshadowingSprinkledNamez13.4k points

The Trail Killer is definitely smart because he's avoided detection in a modern era where our phones self snitch on us (location/secretly recording) and there's security cameras everywhere. I don't think he's going to get caught unless he wants to...

Even if the Trail Killer wasn't active now and going out every night, he didn't need to be. Matthew the chaos he caused and there was no shortage of entertainment! Besides, he could always make a comeback whenever he pleased... But not until he was inspired. There was no rush and the thrill had yet to fade.

In fact, with the funeral coming up he had a feeling it was just getting started.

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The day of the funeral arrived and the mood could be felt throughout the house. Apparently, no one had any foresight because it took until the day *of* the funeral to realise no one had packed any clothes that could pass as traditional mourning attire. Sure, the event was made out to be extremely casual but as Ludwig's friends and family, they all wanted to dress as respectfully as possible to mourn their grief.

Because of that it meant they had to leave even earlier than planned, cutting it close to stop by everyone's houses and still arrive early so the Chief could explain the role Gilbert and Feliciano were playing to them.

Matthew was ready and waiting, dressed in clean casual black clothes and left to imagine what was going to happen as everyone got ready - or as ready as they could without the clothes. The shower had been running non-stop since the sun came up and Matthew wondered if there was any hot water left before pushing that thought aside in favour of mentally preparing. The funeral advertising had tremendous reach and Matthew hoped the police had shot themselves in the foot with this idea because there would be far too many people to monitor if half the city showed up.

But the Chief wanted to bait a reaction out of him and Matthew had to imagine what his first instinctual and truthful reaction would be. Honestly, he thought he wouldn't react at all and keep his face plain because expressing what he felt on the outside was a no-no. But then he thought maybe he'd feel the need to act like everyone around him and layer on the sadness thick. One of those two prepared reactions would probably occur naturally if he didn't know he was going to be watched.

Maybe if he had a subtle reaction, of showing just a little bit of sadness as if it were genuine, he would be overlooked. But Matthew wasn't worried. His facade was unmatched and not even Ludwig, who created the criminal profile for his own murderer, could see past it.

Matthew was loitering in the living room waiting for the moment Alfred decided he was ready when his brother came out of his room while tugging on his shirt.

"Uh, Mattie," Alfred said like he only just remembered his brother there. "Do I look alright?"

Alfred was dressed in all black, smart casual and without his signature jacket for once, which spoke of the severity of the situation.

"You look fine," Matthew reassured.

"Okay, cool. I'm ready to go." Alfred went to grab his keys and motioned for everyone else to get going. "See you when we get back."

Matthew blinked and stood up, unable to lean casually as he glanced at Alfred and his friends with furrowed eyebrows and a naked look of betrayal. It was like there was something unspoken that had happened between them all and as always, Matthew was oblivious to it. It was like they had all just in unison assumed that Matthew wasn't coming. Matthew bit his tongue because he wasn't going to give them the benefit of the doubt and consider that maybe it was because he had never indicated that he had wanted to come when none of them had asked! He never indicated he *didn't* want to come and sue him for not realising he was supposed to realise what they would assume and counter it by acting.

"I'm coming," Matthew stated. Did Alfred not notice Matthew was wearing black too?

"Oh," Alfred remarked with a pause. "Ah, okay. I've only got five seats in my car though..."

"We can take my car, Alfred?" Kiku added politely. "I don't mind driving."

"That's a good idea," Antonio nodded. "If we split up we won't take as long to get dressed and get to the funeral."

"Yeah, I guess we'll do that," Alfred swung his keys decisively. "I'll go with Toni and Gil cus they're going to the same place, Kiku you take Feli and Mattie."

So that's how Matthew found himself sitting in the back of Kiku's car, unsurprisingly a Japanese model. It was cuter than Alfred's American-made car, which sped off the second all the passengers were in and the doors were closed. Matthew heard Kiku 'tisk' in disapproval as he began driving with more respect for common sense and road safety.

"I hope Gil's going to be okay," Feliciano said, his voice quiet and his posture tight.

Kiku's blank eyes were focused on the road, so Matthew leaned in.

"I'm sure he will be. It won't be long until you see him again."

Kiku stopped by Feliciano's house first giving him time to run in and get changed, albeit half in the car, before Kiku drove to his own. They eventually made it to their final destination to see a familiar car waiting in the parking lot.

"Took ya long enough." Was the first thing Alfred said with a smirk, leaning on the side of his car. He, Antonio and Gilbert were all sipping drinks, most likely bought from going through a drive-through.

Being a couple of hours early, they were the only few cars parked. But Matthew had to assume it was only a matter of time before the giant parking lot was full of activity.

Not wanting to linger around for long, the group went to find the Chief. At the narrow entrance, Matthew noticed a sign-in sheet being set up that Alfred foolishly jumped at the opportunity to 'autograph'.

"Excuse me, what's this for?" Antonio questioned the officer who was sitting at the booth with the sheet.

The officer went on to explain that it was 'supposed to' track numbers for some administrative reason, which sounded like it was being read off of a script and was most likely bullshit. There was a small camera attached to the booth and Matthew knew that since this funeral was an exclusive event, that camera wasn't there to stream it. It had to have another purpose...

He had to assume more cameras would be recording the entire event and Matthew would have to keep that in mind. The camera at the booth was likely to get faces to go with names so anyone who stood out to the police could be investigated. Matthew had to admit it was clever.

But not clever enough when their group wasn't made to sign it, not when another officer came along... accompanied by the Chief of Police.

The aura of the group shifted into something *uncomfortable* as the Chief's intimidating and unwelcoming presence suffocated any semblance of calm and the room became tense. Any relaxed demeanour Gilbert had immediately vanished as he stiffened and his pale face somehow lost even more blood. He wasn't the only one. Feliciano shrunk back, Antonio and Alfred put on serious faces while Kiku hardly changed at all, only keeping his eyes on the ground. Matthew just kept his face a pleasant neutral, because while he wasn't close to Ludwig, he wanted to support his friends and he had no reason to think negatively about the police... But he still shifted to display *discomfort*, because he wasn't going to stand out from the flock.

"Good morning, thank you all for coming," The man said formally, his deep voice stern. "I need Gilbert and Feliciano to come with me now. The rest of you can sit wherever you'd like but stay quiet and don't interfere as we rehearse."

"Yup, got it," Alfred said, his voice a little higher pitched than usual.

Matthew became annoyed when Gilbert shoved his empty drink into him, wordlessly expecting him to take it and dispose of it so he could go with his Grandfather. Matthew didn't show his annoyance though, grabbing the drink as any loyal friend would and ignoring the moisture on his shirt.

"You didn't have anything more appropriate to wear?" The Chief stared down at his Grandson, dressed in what would be considered a reach for 'smart casual' let alone 'formal', who immediately went red.

"It's black and formal! It's the best I had." Gilbert retorted defensively. "I wasn't going to take Ludwig's clothes."

"I suppose your voice still sounds sympathetic, but at least you'll be understood," Chief Beilschmidt noted, almost sounding disappointed it wasn't worse as he turned to walk away. "Now, come with me, there's something I want you to do before we go through a rehearsal."

"Where are we going?" Gilbert asked in apprehension, but the look the Chief gave him made it seem it was because Gilbert said it to challenge him. Matthew laced his fingers together and squeezed as he watched the show. He assumed that the Chief was just under enormous stress and that's why he was acting so strict, but Matthew still enjoyed watching someone treat Gilbert that way and it was so much more poetic when it was Gilbert's own Grandfather... right after Gilbert's brother died.

"I want you to see your brother before you take to the stage. You've been isolating yourself all week and making yourself unreachable so this will be your last opportunity to find closure." The Chief's eyes bored into Gilbert with growing intensity, as if he was speaking to a rebellious child. "I need you to understand *exactly* what is at stake."

"What...?" This time it was Feliciano who spoke up, seemingly unintentionally. "Ludwig's...? He's here?"

Feliciano had been highly strung all morning, barely holding his nerves together with the help of his friends. And now it looked like the reality of the funeral was about to crash down on him.

From the Chief's words, Matthew knew that Ludwig's body was on display here somewhere. Well, of course he was. It was a funeral after all. Glancing around, there was a stage far up front with a stand... a large stand that resembled a table and Matthew expected that if a casket was to be put anywhere, it was going to be there.

Matthew had to wonder if that was a part of 'the catch' that the police were trying to set up. If it was an open casket and Matthew really hoped it was... they were going to be waiting for who would go up and take a look, and how they would respond. Reactions there would be telling.

Oh, if it *was* open casket then the marking Matthew had left on Ludwig's forehead would be visible and if memory served correctly, the police never actually told the public about the Trail Killer's signature. So a lot of people would be confused upon seeing it... but not the killer. Very clever, but good thing Matthew was feeling sharp today and ready to tackle anything the police threw his way.

Gilbert was staring at Feliciano and the cogs were evidently turning in his brain when it became obvious that Feliciano had overwhelmingly conflicting feelings about seeing Ludwig's *body* but was unable to vocalize anything to the Chief of Police... and Ludwig's grandfather.

Gilbert suddenly had a look of feral determination cross his face before his eyes narrowed at his Grandfather.

"We know *exactly* what's at stake and you *can't* make Feli do something that'll just *fuck* him up more!" Gilbert growled as he stepped in front of Feliciano. "And I fucking *hope* you're not planning

on *showing* him off to the whole fucking city! You can't just put him on display! Would he have even wanted that?"

Gilbert's voice was straining because even though it was almost healed it was still rough and he struggled to speak loud and clear.

"Gil, I can..." Feliciano trembled as he grabbed Gilbert's shirt from behind. "I can do it... for Ludwig... I want to help!"

The Chief's hardened gaze softened when he looked at Feliciano, giving Matthew the impression that not only have they met before, but likely due to Ludwig's fondness of the Italian his Grandfather had a soft spot for him too. His eldest grandson, not so much but maybe Chief Beilschmidt had the ability to sense who deserved wrath and who didn't.

"I understand if you can't see him again, but I still need you to speak today. Everything is prewritten and there's no need to keep yourself composed. In fact, it would be a lot of help if you didn't try to hold your emotions in. Your genuine grief could help further this investigation."

"I can!" Feliciano declared. "I can help!"

Maybe because Kiku *could* keep himself composed was the reason why the Chief didn't ask him to say any words. That's what Matthew assumed anyway as he eyed Ludwig's other close friend, who was having a staring contest with the floor and winning.

"I know you can," The Chief said then sighed sharply as his eyes landed back on Gilbert, who was getting antsy at being ignored.

"Every choice I make is for the greater good and I will not have you question me. If you must know, there will be no public viewing, however that is not something I require your approval for. If it would catch this killer, then I know Ludwig wouldn't be against it, so don't lecture me about my grandson's wishes."

Gilbert's shoulders were heaving as if he were restraining himself from some sort of outburst. Matthew didn't know if he was going to cry or 'Hulk out'.

"But you're right. It would be no good letting you see him now-"

"I want to see him!" Gilbert's voice broke. "You can't not let me see him! He's *my* brother-!"

"*Control yourself*." Chief Beilschmidt demanded as he raised his voice. "Either you see him just before the beginning of the funeral, or if you cannot compose yourself then you can see him *after*. I want you to make a decision based on how you'll cooperate with the proceedings."

Alfred looked torn between hightailing it out of there because it felt *awkward* to be watching (welcome to Matthew's life, the cursed observer) and squaring up and fighting the *Chief of Police*.

Matthew couldn't get an easy read on Gilbert without seeing his face. But from the way he had gone rigid, he probably was weighing up options or feeling nothing at all.

"I would have liked for you to have seen him first so your emotions were strong and you could evoke a strong reaction from the audience, but I know you can bring results even if you don't see him. I'd even encourage your habitual use of rough language incorporated into the speech where

you see fit," Chief Beilschmidt continued with an icy tone. "But if you continue to be argumentative then I can't express just how disappointed I am."

Gilbert lunged forward and punched his grandfather in the arm. He didn't even say anything in particular, but he did yell. Gilbert screamed with haunting levels of frustration and grief that threatened to steal his voice from him again. Everyone made noises of shock and Feliciano started crying as he tried to pull Gilbert back.

"I am so sorry sir," Antonio ran forward to put himself between them while Alfred helped wrangle Gilbert in. "He's been grieving really badly and he definitely will do anything to help with the investigation, just give him some space to calm down."

"Yeah, I promise he can do it, but seriously, just give him a minute to cry it out instead of telling him to 'get it under control'," Alfred said but Matthew could tell he was biting his tongue so he wouldn't say more. More than biting his tongue, Alfred was clenching his fists and coiled tight like he was about to lunge.

Kiku was watching the scene and letting it play out with sagging shoulders and blank eyes that suggested he was really somewhere far away.

Matthew was watching too, but not as *passively* as Kiku. He was caught up wondering why Gilbert didn't go for the face. At that moment, all Gilbert had felt was rage he wanted to make his Grandfather *stop*. Something Matthew could understand. But why did Gilbert hold back, as if he was afraid of crossing some line even in hateful grief? He still had the urge to hit and Gilbert was a slave to his emotions... but for him to be that aware of the consequences, even subconsciously... he held back. Why? Maybe going for the face was too aggressive. Too permanent and scary? Too confrontational?

The only thing Matthew could think was that Gilbert *did* understand what it was like to be powerless against someone and unable to overcome the training ingrained into him after years, yet still determined to resist.

Chief Beilschmidt didn't even touch the area punched as if it didn't leave a mark or ache at all. His face was twisted with an expression warning that his patience was about to wear out.

"Pull yourself together. I don't expect to see this when you're in front of the public. I know I shouldn't expect much from you now but if you really understood the stakes you wouldn't be acting like this."

Gilbert just screamed and bared his teeth like a feral animal as he spat hate with his entire heart pouring into twisting his face into something painful. Something relateable, that was for sure. It resonated in Matthew and he knew that somewhere deep down, had he not been so reserved and *suffocated*, that would be him. He'd rant and rave and bark and bite. It imagined it would feel freeing to *feel*. Anyone could only take so much.

Antonio struggled to hold Gilbert back and Alfred tore his focus from the Chief to help his friend hold back Gilbert while Feliciano fussed over him with words that surely fell on deaf ears.

Matthew had to admit, this was really putting the fun in 'funeral'. The event hadn't even begun and this was nothing like he had expected.

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Chief Beilschmidt had walked off with Gilbert and Feliciano in tow, the pair clutching at each other as Gilbert tried to wrangle his crippling shame for his earlier outburst while Feliciano tried to help. The Chief had said nothing, only lamenting the lost time they'd have to make up for. Matthew could tell it only made Gilbert feel worse because his Grandfather didn't even acknowledge it at all. It even made Matthew feel a little annoyed because didn't the Chief know he caused that?

Those left behind had awkwardly shuffled around for a few moments before finding some seats a couple of rows from the front.

"I wanna say that Grandpa-stick-up-the-ass gets a pass cus I know he's grieving and hasn't been such a dick before," Alfred began as a warning as if prefacing whatever he was going to say next. "But I'm so fucking glad Gil got a punch in. It must've felt *good*."

"It didn't look like it felt good," Kiku stated, his voice hardly as animated as the others.

"Yeah not for Grandpa of the year, it looked like he winced!"

"He meant for Gil," Antonio mumbled. "I know it'll only make him feel guilty and trust me when I say, guilt can eat away at you."

"Well, he fucking shouldn't feel guilty," Alfred huffed. "I've never fucking liked how his grandpa compared them all the fucking time and favoured Lud so much so Gil should feel good. Grumpy grandpa can suck it cus he pushed Gil so far so it's actually his fault he got punched."

Matthew could sense the irony here, but it didn't sting. Not when he was focused on keeping a curious eye on the family on the stage. They were out of range to be heard, but from the gestures, he could tell Chief Beilschmidt was explaining directions.

"I'm just glad the favouritism didn't ruin their relationship as brothers," Antonio said earnestly.

"But did you know what did fuck it up?" Alfred smirked as he set up for a joke, but then when he glanced at Kiku his smile skipped. "Yeah, never mind."

The joke was no doubt something to do with the very setting they were in, so it really was for the best that Alfred didn't say it or that would be very insensitive. Kiku looked like he was already so tightly wound up that Matthew was glad Alfred thought twice before giving everyone secondhand embarrassment at worst.

"Ludwig was a good brother and friend," Kiku said, his eyes lingering lazily on the stage ahead.

"Yeah, he was." Alfred agreed without resistance.

"I just hope we can be there for Gilbert," Antonio added. "Now his only family is his Grandfather..."

"A real shitty one who shat on him when Francis died too." Alfred readjusted himself on the chair impatiently. "Well, just shat on him in general, but was extra shitty when Gil's bestie died."

Matthew wished he had his oblivious tip line set up since Arthur had died and really didn't want to know how much he had missed out on because of it. He continued to watch Gilbert attempt to pull himself together on the stage while he listened into Alfred's friend's conversation.

"Yeah, I should've moved in then... after Francis. But I was caught up in my own grief." Antonio put his head in his hands. "But at least Ludwig was there for him. Ludwig was always there for him when Gil couldn't reach their Grandfather's standards."

"Yeah I would've felt like a fucking failure if that was my Grandpa," Alfred grunted.

"Ludwig would never let anyone feel like a failure," Kiku still felt distant, like he was zoned out and everyone fell into silence for a few moments.

"I hope we can see him after." Alfred's tone indicated who *he* was. "Might help if we get to say goodbye."

"That would be nice," Kiku said with a faint smile and Alfred draped an arm over him.

"I can tell him that I'll make sure Gil and Feli will be looked after," Antonio whispered. "Maybe it'll help him rest easier."

"We all will," Alfred murmured. "Look after them, I mean. And each other. Everything's gonna be fine."

Matthew would have his own goodbye to say. It would be nice to say it while looking down on Ludwig's corpse, but he'd have to settle for saying it in his head if he ever saw his victim's body. He hoped he would because he hadn't seen any of his victims since he left them to rot. He wanted to see how they were now, after everything. He wanted to see what he made them become.

Or maybe there was just no explanation. Just no reasoning. Matthew just wanted to see Ludwig, and he couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

I think I'll go back to uploading every fortnight now... I'm a little burnt out. But do enjoy the suspense >:)

Also this is definitely going to the last time I try to format reddit because it took all day to do uhughughuhguhguhg. Formatting is so cool when it works...

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

> This fic now surpasses 100k words! Holy shit. Not only that, but it'll be a year old next week too! Here's a fat chapter to celebrate!
> C bomb counter: x3. You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eventually, the venue was stuffed to the brim with people and the event started after an announcement that no phones were to be used. Matthew figured that was so what happened here wouldn't be leaked to those who hadn't come and defeat the whole purpose of turning it into a big deal. Or it was just for respect. He could be reading too much into it but he had to otherwise one day he'd be caught without his guard up.

Gilbert and Feliciano were sitting on chairs at the back of the stage along with some other officers that Matthew really didn't care about. Alfred's friends stood out as they weren't in police uniform and looked much more grim than the professional attitudes around them. Matthew had to assume that they hadn't seen Ludwig yet - an easy assessment to make when Matthew knew how far the two of them could lose control. Maybe Gilbert's Grandfather didn't want to risk Gilbert choosing to fight him on the stage in front of the public and derail the event. A pity, why didn't the Chief consider that would get a reaction from the Trail Killer all the same? Matthew would definitely find it entertaining.

But they weren't the only ones on the stage that Matthew recognised. In fact, there was someone else that he shouldn't be surprised to see, but only surprised he didn't see him earlier.

Roderich was Gilbert's cousin and copped a lot of harassment from him. Well, it went both ways and Matthew didn't really like either of them. Had Matthew come across Roderich on the street, he would've definitely taken the opportunity. Roderich was self-righteous and stuck up, everyone else was below him and whenever Matthew was noticed by him he really wished he wasn't. Roderich had a talent for making people feel *small*.

But Matthew wouldn't allow that anymore, so he told himself that Roderich wasn't a threat. He found a little amusement in how even in a time like this, Gilbert and Roderich were refusing to look at each other with crossed arms and scowls.

Chief Beilschmidt was standing at the front of the stage, demanding attention with his strong presence as he monologued a very clinical-sounding welcome into a microphone.

The table centre of the stage was still empty.

After the Chief's introductory monologue, everyone turned to watch as six police officers carried a casket to the stage as Roderich stood and played the violin. Matthew risked a look at Gilbert and he could just tell by Gilbert's face that was fucking with him. The albino was gripping the edges of his seat so hard as if it tore him apart that he couldn't help carry *his own brother* at *his funeral*.

Matthew was biting his cheek so hard to prevent his face from showing anything that it had to be bleeding. He continued to remind himself to keep his eyes where they belonged and not let them explore or linger, and to keep his face in line.

The show went on and various officers took to the stage to give eulogies, their delivery didn't sound anything like the chaos on the police radio the night Ludwig died. There was no emotion behind hardened faces as they recited words from pieces of paper that Matthew had to note had no creases. Matthew couldn't help but be sceptical because only a few members of the audience knew that whatever Gilbert and Feliciano said wouldn't be their own words.

But to their credit, the officers delivered their speeches well and Matthew could convince themselves they meant it, even if their delivery made it hardly feel personal. Though Matthew supposed as police officers, they've had plenty of experience tampering their own emotions to focus on upholding objective law. He knew from that night on the radio how much they cared.

Roderich took to the stage, his face leaving the impression that he was above this whole event and would rather not be there. It could be grief, but even so, Roderich usually held himself to higher standards than that. He spoke as usual like he was gracing everyone with his presence and they should be thankful for him being there, but as time went on Matthew realised that Roderich had respect for Ludwig and considered him an equal. Now Roderich was upset that his cousin was dead and Matthew could only hope that Roderich was aching because of it.

Still, it wasn't the most moving and it left Matthew questioning why the Chief had Roderich up there at all. If only because he was family? Or because Roderich's attitude of condensation would get a reaction?

But everything changed when Feliciano took to the stage. When Chief Beilschmidt announced him it took a moment for it to process before the boy jumped up and walked over to the imposing podium with tense speed.

Feliciano held himself together for longer than expected and even when the tears started he still managed to make most of his words heard, even if he had to stutter over them three or four times. It would've been hard to tell that Feliciano didn't write that speech himself, but the Chief did want them to put their own spin on it to make it personal and Matthew had to admit, Feliciano did a good job. Even if it really wasn't a conscious effort.

Matthew had to admit that seeing Feliciano on the stage made him feel something, something he supposed was the last of his empathy. He felt bad that Feliciano was so distressed now... and Matthew felt the long forgotten ache of being expected to help comfort him. But with time Feliciano would be fine. Everyone loved him and he'd always have the never-ending support and love of his friends. Besides, even if he felt bad for Feliciano, it didn't mean that Matthew felt bad about what he did. It was all too easy to remind himself that not only was it necessary to kill Ludwig, but he enjoyed it.

When Feliciano was done speaking he staggered backwards to collapse in his seat beside Gilbert, who immediately turned his attention to him. Even when Chief Beilschmidt called for him, Gilbert let a silence hang in the air as he attended to Feliciano before going to the podium. Matthew didn't miss the way Gilbert ignored his grandfather, his eyes lingering on his younger brother's casket before speaking.

While Feliciano looked like he was seconds away from collapsing while giving his eulogy, Gilbert looked like he was seconds away from going feral. SThe sadness was very evident in him, but grief

wasn't all sadness. Anger was just brimming under the surface and causing him to spit every curse word he uttered as he gripped the podium for strength.

Outside, Matthew performed all the necessary body language. He shuffled in his seat and pulled faces like he was feeling his 'friends' grief and tapering it for the sake of being strong. But inside, Matthew was fixated on every word. The *thrill* was very much still *alive*.

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The funeral didn't go longer than an hour, but it felt like it had only been ten minutes before Chief Beilschmidt was thanking everyone for coming and promising to avoid tragedies like this in the future. Matthew didn't think that was a promise he was going to keep. How could he? Once again, the Chief was practically challenging him.

The crowd quickly rose in volume as people stood to either mingle or leave. Alfred made a comment about wishing there was food set up like all the other funerals and Antonio pointed out those were privately hosted by family so Alfred should just settle for whatever drinks were available. Alfred lamented that the drinks probably weren't alcoholic before quickly switching his tune to say it was for the best while Antonio chuckled nervously.

Matthew was only half tuning into whatever they were saying, as he was still focused on the stage. Just because the funeral was officially over didn't mean the show was over. Chief Beilschmidt was preventing Gilbert and Feliciano from leaving the stage - if only because of social convention. Neither of them could walk away as the Chief of Police spoke to them, presumably about their performances. Roderich was there too, albeit more willingly and from his glances towards Gilbert, no doubt he had something to say about Gilbert's delivery.

Without warning Matthew was roughly grabbed from behind and pulled into someone. His heart stuttered to a stop.

"Hey everyone! Long time no see! Fancy meeting you here!"

The obnoxious voice booming with volume in his ear came from an equally obnoxious person. Mathias wasn't someone Matthew was friends with yet here he was with an arm tight around his and Alfred's neck. Alfred was the only one unbothered by this, apparently fine with huffing the thickly sprayed-on deodorant coming from his friend. If Matthew wasn't in such a good mood from the funeral he'd be bothered by Mathias' appearance, the other was just Gilbert 2.0 in terms of humour and tolerability. But Matthew liked his chances of fading into the background... once he got out of Mathias' headlock.

He didn't have to do anything, Mathias let go on his own and Matthew was already forgotten. Good. He didn't want to be roped into a conversation with Mathias, that would be a drain. Mathias liked to act like he was so grandiose and really made Matthew feel like Mathias was living in a different reality. Yet Alfred and all their friends seemed to love it.

"Hey dude!" Alfred hugged back. "I didn't know you were coming. Where's everyone else? They came, right?"

"Yeah, but they got lost in the crowd I guess," Mathias shrugged without looking back. "Did you notice how sensitive everyone was when Feli was talking? I don't get why so many people were crying or shitting themselves when the boss cop was acting so serious. No one here knew Ludwig but us so I don't know why they care so much."

"I didn't notice anyone's reactions," Antonio confessed. "I was paying too much attention..."

Matthew had noticed it. He could feel it in the air, feel the energy of people as they had watched. There was fear, sadness and hope. There were tense emotions in nearly every face, though that could just be confirmation bias considering they were at a funeral.

"Yeah me too," Alfred added. "Was there really *that many* people *reacting*? I guess the Chief's emotional manipulation paid off..."

"What do you mean?" Mathias asked, his smile never faltering.

"He thinks that the Trail Killer's here somewhere so he wanted Gil and Feli to say some shit to try and get a reaction out of him," Alfred explained.

"I don't think you should say that so loud..." Antonio muttered warningly as he glanced around. Kiku was still staring blankly at the stage but Matthew imagined he'd agree with Antonio.

"What? It's already over so the guy would've reacted, right?" Alfred's face changed. "Ohhh, he's meant to respond after or something? Shit, I'll shut up then."

"Holy shit! You think he's actually here?!" Mathias seemed too excited at the idea and scanned the room with wide eyes. It was like his brain never filtered anything and *never* saw the problem with anything he did. "You think the *Trail Killer's* in *this room* with *us*?"

"Fuckin' probably," Alfred said darkly as he glanced around with narrowed eyes. "Apparently, he's an attention whore and gets off from all this shit."

"The Chief thinks so," Antonio added quietly. "I just hope they've learnt something because of this."

"If they haven't, they're useless," Alfred retorted. "But they better have otherwise Gil and Feli did this shit for nothing."

"Speak of the devil!" Antonio announced as Gilbert appeared, hunched over and clearly on edge. "You did a good job, amigo. Ludwig would be proud."

Gilbert's mouth twisted upon hearing that. It didn't twist up or down, just twisted, like he didn't know how or what to feel or felt *too much*. Given what he did to himself and his own living space, it was probably too much.

"Hang on, where's Feli?" Alfred glanced back at the stage. Chief Beilschmidt was still up there and talking to Feliciano, who was upset but at least it didn't seem like the Chief was the cause. The man had a hand placed on Feliciano's shoulder so it looked like he was trying to be comforting.

"I can't stand it," Gilbert grumbled, his voice regressing in quality and he rubbed his throat while pulling a face of discomfort.

"You're strong, you'll be alright," Mathias said and slapped a hand on the albino's back. "How have you been anyway?"

Gilbert kept shaking his head.

"I can't stand being near Opa." He muttered, then chuckled. "He smells like a gross old man."

Alfred and Mathias laughed but Antonio frowned.

"Roderich's being an fucking *unawesome* asshole, like fucking *usual*," Gilbert continued. "I can't even say anything to him or Opa's going to have a problem, like fucking usual."

Antonio grabbed onto Gilbert's tense shoulders.

"Are you okay amigo-?"

Gilbert pushed his hands off and hardened his jaw.

"*Yeah*. I'm fine. I just need some water," He dictated as he took a step back, and then another before pausing with a constipated look. Gilbert tried clearing his throat but when he spoke his voice was no clearer. "Opa said we can see him after this..."

That caught Kiku's attention, who had been more quiet than usual since arriving.

"That would be nice. I would like to say a proper goodbye."

"Yeah, we can promise him that the Trail fucker will get caught *his way* and pay legally, y'know?" Alfred said, trying to appeal to Gilbert and cheer him up. It didn't work, Gilbert looked just as drained.

"Hey, me and Ludwig weren't really that close," Mathias asked as he leaned on the back of the chair heavily, "but do you mind if I tag along to see him?"

Mathias jerked when someone tapped him from behind, grabbing everyone's attention as he turned to see his friends had caught up with him.

"Howdy y'all," Alfred greeted with a wave, which Tino returned with a small smile.

"We came for support. I'm sorry for your loss everyone," Tino consoled and Berwald made a deep noise of agreement.

Gilbert just jerked his head away, clearly feeling like words would never fix anything and Matthew didn't miss the way his hands flexed. It seemed that Gilbert was doing everything he could not to 'Hulk out' and potentially ruin his chances at seeing his brother.

"Thank you very much," Kiku responded with downcast eyes.

"It sucks that Ludwig died, he was such a good cop-" Mathias squeaked when Lukas pinched him.

Matthew wasn't close with anyone, but he had far less exposure to this friend group than others. Even so, he still had opinions on them all. He liked Tino, who had never given him a reason to dislike or be wary of him. He was cheerful to all indiscriminately. Matthew didn't mind Lukas, even if he did remind him of Arthur a bit. Probably because they were friends and Matthew had seen Lukas at Arthur's funeral. Mathias had been there then and Matthew could recall Mathias asking about how Arthur had died and if he could see him. Lukas had pinched him then too.

Emil was between Tino and Lukas. Matthew didn't have a problem with him at all because he really just kept to himself. Then there was Berwald. Before Matthew started this descent, he didn't care for him because Berwald was never rude and his intimidation was never as harassing as Ivan's. He simply minded his own business and Matthew never felt torn up around him. But now, Berwald

reminded him of Ludwig and maybe Matthew was paranoid but he couldn't help but imagine what thoughts Berwald was hiding. Was he as perceptive as Ludwig? Matthew liked that he was reserved but that meant no one knew what he was thinking.

"I'm going to get water," Gilbert grunted before storming off and Alfred cringed as he ran a hand through his hair. Mathias rubbed where Lukas had pinched before rounding on his friend.

"What?! Ludwig was a good cop! Well, maybe not good enough because *somehow* he got- *ouch*"

Lukas pinched him again and this time Tino jabbed him in the side as Berwald gave him a look of disappointment.

"Okay! Sorry." Mathias mumbled in annoyance. "I just can't believe he didn't see it coming."

"No one did," Antonio stated.

"Hey, Kiku?" Alfred was shaking his unresponsive friend. "You good? Oh, fucking hell."

"What's wrong with him?" Mathias asked.

"I dunno, grief and shit." Alfred sighed. "I dunno what to do about it cus at least when Feli cries I can give him a tissue and when Gil wants to punch stuff I can give him my hands but I think Kiku's kinda broken... if that's not too mean to say?"

"I know you're not trying to be mean," Tino said as he rested a hand on Kiku's shoulder, but his foggy eyes didn't move from the casket.

"Maybe take him to get some water too," Lukas suggested. "He might feel better if he's hydrated."

"I don't think hydration is going to help." Mathias got pinched for that comment. Again. Matthew felt happy whenever Mathias was scowling because he got what was coming to him.

"I'll take him," Antonio offered after a look was passed between Alfred. "I want to find Gil anyway."

"Yeah, be my guest," Alfred sounded tired and looked it too as he watched Antonio pull Kiku away. "Man, I knew this whole thing was a bad idea."

"It might help them feel better in the long run," Lukas said and Alfred shrugged a response before his face lit up. That was all the warning Matthew had as he realised Alfred had spotted someone else and more people joined the fray.

"Oi! Jonesie!"

Only one person called Alfred by that nickname.

"My favourite cousin!" Alfred was smiling as he jumped up to catch the full-body bear hug that was being thrown at him. Arthur would be rolling in his grave at those words and Matthew found amusement in that.

"How's it going, mate?" Steve said as he slapped Alfred's back roughly.

"I'm okay somehow," Alfred chuckled with a shrug. "How you doing?"

"Ah, I've been better," Steve scratched his head, always carefree, even in a setting like this.

"I'm alright too," said another voice and then everyone noticed Zach lingering behind his older brother.

"Oh, and my other favourite cousin!" Alfred chuckled as he went to give Zach a hug, looking a little bit ashamed for only just noticing him. "How come you guys are here?"

"Well, we thought it'd be right cus we were friendly with Lud so figured we'd stop by and see everyone," Steve shrugged. "Haven't been up since that big bash we have after Arthur so figured it was time to stop by. All this serial killer stuff is crazy, ay?"

Matthew furrowed his eyebrows as he tried to think about what Steve was talking about when he referenced some event after Arthur, then grit his teeth when he realised *why* he didn't know what the hell Steve was on about. Once again, he was left out!

He breathed out and shook it off.

Matthew loitered as Alfred caught up with their cousins, which Matthew had to honestly say he wasn't that close to. Not that he was close with anyone, but growing up Matthew didn't get to spend as much time with his cousins as Alfred did and his brother didn't know how lucky he had it.

Steve and Zach weren't the last to join their group, Ivan appeared only a few minutes later with a smile on his face but the ever-present glint in his eye, causing a hesitating feeling of wariness. Everything that came out of his mouth could pass for small talk but the delivery always left apprehension. Matthew kept him within view. If he ended up doing something more as the Trail Killer, maybe he should look out for opportunities that would allow him to get some form of revenge on Ivan. After all, it had been a while since Matthew was so inspired to kill those who had personally deserved it.

It wasn't just Ivan he should keep an eye out for. Anyone here he didn't like was an opportunity.

"Well that was a pleasant and respectful funeral," Ivan commented and Kiku nodded in agreement.

"Dude, hey, I wasn't expecting to see you here," Alfred said, his jaw tensed. "We gotta talk later."

Ivan's smile grew wider and Matthew put that in the mental folder of 'things yet to happen, keet tabs'.

It took a while before the public slowly tricked out of the venue until it was just as empty when they arrived, but the police officers, press and reporters remained.

The officers had been mingling with the crowd after the official part of the funeral ended... but Matthew suspected those officers had been instructed to do so. Anyone who came up to them with questions or interest was a suspect. From Matthew's perspective, all the flaws in their attempts seemed all too obvious.

Matthew was still lingering by the large combined group, trying hard not to reminisce on old feelings of never belonging as he sat by a group but was never *a part* of the group. Everyone had returned to the row Alfred was occupying and catching up with each other while all Matthew cared to do was watch.

Honestly, he was just holding out for the opportunity to see Ludwig.

Still aware he could be under surveillance, Matthew appeared to be actively listening to whatever conversation was happening but would occasionally glance around to keep up with his surroundings. He caught the Chief standing off the side of the stage and talking to what was presumably a group of reporters. Matthew couldn't make out what they were saying or what the conversation was about, but no doubt was it something to do with the funeral or coming memorial. Chief Beilschmidt would've listened when Ludwig told him the serial killer was attention-driven, so the Chief was probably going to tightly control the media to try and control *him*. Matthew scanned the reporter's faces but didn't know what type of media company or publishing they belonged to. He figured if he encountered something suspicious that could be a problem he'd deal with it, but with so many reporters flocking the Chief of Police, at least Matthew had the heads up to be wary of the media.

The moment Chief Beilschmidt was finished speaking and dismissed the press, he turned heel and strode over to them with his usual stern look fixed in place.

Just as the man opened his mouth to speak, he was cut off.

"When can I see him?" Gilbert's raspy voice didn't undermine his demanding tone at all, but it did make him sound a little desperate. "I did what you wanted so let me see Lud."

To the Police Chief's credit, his mask of professionalism never slipped beyond an eye twitch.

"We can make our way over there momentarily and everyone will have an opportunity to pay respects and say goodbye," Chief Beilschmidt said as he stepped forward to stare Gilbert down. "Afterward, we'll take him to the cemetery so he can be put to rest."

"Oh," Gilbert seemed taken aback and cleared his throat. "So soon? As in, today? Now?"

"It's been a week Gil," Antonio said softly. "It was going to happen soon."

"Yeah you'll be alright, we're here for you," Alfred threw an arm over Gilbert's shoulders and gave him a confident smile.

"I'd appreciate it if only my grandson was present," Chief Beilschmidt stated. Not cruelly, but with finality that sent a shock through the others.

"What? Why?" Gilbert's hoarse voice strained with volume. "It's not awesome to exclude them like that, they loved Lud too you know-"

"I'm *not* depriving them of an opportunity to say goodbye *now*," Chief Beilschmidt declared, his patience clearly wearing thin from the circumstances.

"But what about Feli?!" Gilbert swung an arm towards Feliciano, who had a hand in his mouth and tears in his eyes. Again. "Feli's basically family-"

"Stop being argumentative." Chief Beilschmidt's voice held a finality that silenced the group. "I never wanted to bury my grandsons so respect my wishes that it will be a private matter between family. Anyone else will be welcome to visit after."

"It's okay Gil..." Feliciano spoke up, his voice desperately pleading for peace "It's okay, I understand."

Matthew could see the moment the light behind Gilbert's eye dimmed as he withdrew.

"Yeah, fine... It can be just us... I've been meaning to visit Mama and Papa for a while anyway." Gilbert's face was all twisted with grief and frustration, but he didn't dare go against his grandfather anymore.

That wasn't true for others in the group and Matthew could tell that Alfred was just barely holding himself back from planting his fist into the Police Chief's face.

Then the Chief turned around and led them to the stage so they could see the body. With his back turned, Alfred settled for sticking his finger up at the man and he wasn't the only one. But the only one who had a problem with it was Feliciano.

"Please don't, he's suffering too," Feliciano whined and pulled at Alfred's sleeve.

"So why's he being such a cunt about it?" Steve said and Alfred couldn't withhold his laughter with a snort. Their Australian cousin really had a habit of just saying it how it was and so it was a no-brainer that he was Alfred's favourite. Arthur was rattling in his grave.

Alfred slapped a hand over his mouth and Lukas pinched him too.

"Yeah yeah, I know," Alfred waved him off. "I'm going to be supportive, cut me some slack."

But between everyone muttering it was obvious that no one wanted to cut the Chief any slack. Matthew vindictively wished the Chief knew how much of an asshole everyone saw him as now. If the Chief wasn't careful, the public would see him as an asshole too. Matthew wondered if he could orchestrate that... before pushing the planning thoughts from his head. He wanted to live in the moment and enjoy seeing his latest victim.

Roderich was already waiting on the stage, which seemed bigger now they were on it. Gilbert looked torn between scowling at Roderich and staring at the casket, but no matter where his eyes flickered he couldn't bring himself to look at his Grandfather.

Matthew paid him no mind once he was close to the casket, instead impressed by the mountain of arranged flowers sitting on the lid, held together by an almost invisible thin mesh. There was a great metaphor there somewhere, he just knew it. Chief Beilschmidt instructed Gilbert to help lift them off and others rushed in to help. From Matthew's outside perspective, he found great amusement in the fact that anyone who jumped in to help all gravitated towards Gilbert's side, leaving the Chief to lift one end by himself.

The flowers were pushed off onto the ground behind the casket and only the smooth wood was between them and Ludwig. Matthew was excited but he had to remind himself not to show it. Be patient, it was only a matter of time before he saw his work. Meanwhile, he could tell everyone around him was nervous.

The silence was thick as Chief Beilschmidt went to lift the lid of the casket, there was only a breath of hesitation but Matthew still caught it. Whatever was inside was too much for even the most powerful and fearless uniform in the city. Everyone had a weakness.

Everyone was holding their breath as the Chief opened the casket and Matthew was hit by the question, did Ludwig even want *this*? He tried to imagine himself in Ludwig's shoes. Would he be embarrassed by being on display like this? Or touched that so many people had gathered to see him, presumably because they loved him. There was a large crowd here, all connected to each other and people that Ludwig did know.

Maybe it didn't matter, because he was dead. Who cares what the dead want. The Chief certainly didn't. Even the exclusive family burial ignored Ludwig's wishes as the Chief took control of everything.

Matthew had to wonder, did that make *him dead*? Did he die a long time ago? Because no one gave a shit about him and what he wanted. He learnt very early on in life that he didn't matter. So was he just dead to everyone?

He pushed those thoughts aside. He was too excited to let anything bring him down. With the casket lid propped up, Matthew moved in. It was hard to get close because suddenly everyone was swarming in, but Matthew persisted until he could look over someone's shoulder and get a clear view.

Ludwig was pale, more so than usual. He was dressed in a suit that made his skin look worse than it was. His skin was thin and powdery and his eyes were sunken, but his face was neutral like he could just be asleep. But from his waxy, unnatural composition, no one would ever think that.

There was a fabric covering on Ludwig's forehead and Matthew felt a small pang of disappointment. The only ones who knew about the mark were the killer and the police. Matthew wondered if the decision was a smart move... or if it was motivated by emotion. Was the Chief just hoping to ignore that it was carved there at all?

Matthew bit the inside of his lip as he stared at the Chief. The man had a stern expression but his eyes said it all when he stared down at his favourite grandson. Matthew imagined what his reaction would be if Matthew acknowledged the Trail Symbol carved into his grandson's forehead. He wouldn't do it, but he understood his brother's love for the dramatic as he imagined it. The reaction would certainly be *explosive*.

And it wouldn't just be the Chief's reaction, it would be everyone else's too. Picturing it brought endless options for how things would go down in a ball of flames.

Matthew would never do it, the idea of pulling the trigger on himself and his career so carelessly felt so off-putting, and impossible as there was a giant mental block stopping him from sabotaging himself, but thinking about it was amusing when everyone was in such an emotional state.

Unsurprisingly, it was Feliciano who acted first upon seeing Ludwig. His impulse was as strong as his passion. He choked on a sob and when his knees buckled he caught himself on the edge of the casket.

"I miss you Lud," his whimpers were barely audible from where Matthew stood as they rose and fell in accordance with his sobbing. Matthew could only pick up on a few parts of what Feliciano said. "...say hi to Lovi for me and tell him I love him..."

Matthew could tell that Chief Beilschmidt was bothered by Feliciano leaning on the casket but was by no means going to say anything or move to stop him, instead just watching with pity in his eyes.

"And I love you too," Feliciano's voice broke with a hitch as his hands clambered to grab at Ludwig.

Matthew watched as for a moment, it really looked like Feliciano was about to climb into the casket and tether himself to Ludwig forever. But all he did was lean over to give Ludwig a hug and cry into his chest. The muffled noises rang out louder than any speech the Chief made.

After a couple of moments with no indication of stopping, Feliciano had to be gently pried away. Without taking his eyes off Ludwig, Feliciano let himself be held by Gilbert as he tried to choke out his sobs.

After a worried glance cast to Gilbert and Feliciano, Antonio awkwardly stepped up. With one hand clasped onto his forearm tightly, he didn't dare touch the casket or the man resting inside it.

"Don't worry amigo, I'll look after Gil. I know how much you worried for him so... Just don't worry anymore."

Then Alfred stepped forward, gripping onto the side of the casket with white knuckles.

"He's right, don't you worry. The Trail Killer will get caught and he'll pay."

Matthew had a feeling Alfred was choosing his words carefully with the Chief of Police hovering nearby, but the sentiment was all the same. Alfred was going to personally make sure the Trail Killer would get locked up and Matthew had to question how realistic Alfred really thought that was.

"Oh, and I'll be looking after everyone else too. Okay? Bye," Alfred scuttled away trying to hide how he was sniffling and pushed Kiku forward. "Your turn bro. Get that closure."

Kiku had no expression as he looked down and stared blankly. After a couple of moments, he bowed before stepping away with a lowered head.

"You were always so strong... it was admirable..." As Kiku spoke, his voice lowered in volume until he wasn't speaking at all. Whatever he said, it was in his head. Kiku was always a private person and Matthew supposed he could live without knowing what he said. He could take a guess anyway.

Ivan pushed forward after Kiku and with his hands tightly clasped behind his back, leaned over Ludwig.

"I know what it is like to lose sibling," he prefaced in a tone that sounded... sombre. "I may not like Gilbert, but he will not go unavenged."

Matthew withheld raising his eyebrows and staring right at the Chief because a statement like that right in front of the highest of law enforcement was likely too bold. But he heard a sigh and in his peripheral vision, he saw the Chief's head turn away. Probably choosing to ignore it because of grief.

Roderich didn't ignore it though, and a classic look of criticising distaste crossed his face.

Ivan stepped away looking content and Steve stepped up, cutting off Mathias who was about to jump in.

"You're a legend, ight?" Steve said reassuringly, "I'm sure you've done some good work that'll carry the team and she'll be right in the end. You're a real one mate so rest easy, we can crack open a cold one together in the next life once I get up there, ight?"

"Yeah what he said," Mathias chuckled as he stepped up close and leaned over to get a good look at Ludwig, inspecting every detail. Matthew wondered if he just didn't know what to say or had just never seen someone dead before. Mathias wasn't there for much longer before Lukas sighed and dragged him back.

"Don't impose," Lukas muttered as he swatted his friend, who wasn't too happy about being dragged away.

Lukas, Emil, Tino and Berwald didn't have anything to say and left space for anyone who did. Matthew noticed that Zach didn't go up either but still had a mournful look on his face.

When it looked like no one was going to step up, Matthew did, resting his hands lightly on the casket. He didn't say anything, just stared down with a contemplative face that would make anyone assume he was saying something silently. But in his mind, there was nothing to be said. His thoughts were still.

Matthew made sure not to stand for too long, so with a final mental goodbye he stepped back with the image of Ludwig's stillness burnt into his mind.

Besides, he'd be able to visit the grave another time. It wasn't goodbye forever. Maybe he could visit the other's graves too. He hadn't even said hello to Arthur since he said goodbye at the funeral.

After the majority left, Alfred took Feliciano from Gilbert and pulled him into a hug so his albino friend could talk to his brother. Matthew lingered by Alfred under the pretence that he was helping with Feliciano, but he was really listening to Gilbert.

Alfred didn't say anything as he shoved Feliciano into his chest and wrapped him tightly in a hug. Matthew didn't say anything either as he reached over to pat him on the back.

Gilbert cleared his throat a couple of times, a sound that cut through the peaceful silence.

"Hey Lud..." Gilbert's voice was already playing up, but not from being rough. Gilbert sniffled and kept talking. "I'm sorry I wasn't a better brother- wow, you're really gone, huh-?"

Gilbert gasped as his emotions kept coming. Matthew could tell that Alfred felt awkward from being there and witnessing it and Matthew hoped his brother wouldn't leave, or he would have to follow and miss the show.

"I'm sorry," Gilbert repeated a couple of times and Matthew wondered if he knew what he was saying.

"It'll be okay. I'll fix things and everything will be okay. I know I'm not awesome but I'll make you proud of me, *bruder*. *Tut mir leid*..."

The silence stretched on as Gilbert said nothing and choked back his tears.

Gilbert seemed reluctant to step away but after a few moments of shifting on the spot, he stepped back and walked away. Before Alfred could say anything, Gilbert grabbed for him, pulling them all

off the stage.

Roderich sighed in a way that said 'finally' as he stepped up, clearly intent on saying his piece in privacy. Matthew tried to linger and strain to hear what was being said, but to no avail over the volume of his company and the growing distance from the stage. All he heard was the first few sentences, spoken clearly with dictation and respect.

Chief Beilschmidt was the last off the stage, having waited for everyone to say their piece before he did. He took his time saying something to Ludwig before closing the lid quietly and latching it for the last time.

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Everyone was standing in the parking lot once again and no one spoke louder than a mutter. Those words died to a whisper when the Chief walked up to Feliciano and rested a hand on his rigid shoulder.

"You've done enough for today. I'm grateful for your cooperation and regretful for your loss. I hope you're able to rest."

"I hope I was helpful," Feliciano's voice wobbled as he spoke, fighting through his never-ending tears to be heard. "I'm sorry for you too. I hope you'll be alright."

"I will be." The Chief left no room for uncertainty. "When you're feeling better, please visit my grandson."

An abrupt and hoarse noise came from Gilbert as he suddenly butted in.

"How about this old man? It's so unawesome to exclude Feli like that and you know Lud would want him there," Gilbert's harsh voice was straining like he was holding himself back from yelling. "So if you don't let him come then you'll be burying Lud *without me*."

Gilbert's face was one of spiteful determination as he yanked Feliciano by the arm with an iron grip, refusing to let go and be separated.

"Gilbert, do you have to make a scene?" Roderich huffed. "You always have to strike out, don't you? Opa didn't say they could never come and see him, you know. They can visit his grave afterwards but if you loved Ludwig you would want to respect his wishes for a private burial.

"Oh, cus this whole thing was *exactly* what he would've wanted. *Verpiss dich*, you know exactly how much Ludwig loves Feli and you'd have to *hate him* to *not want* him there," Gilbert sneered at Roderich before rounding back on the Chief. "Think about it asshole. Cus if you don't let him come then when it's your turn to be buried, I won't be there either."

Everyone's eyes were either darting between the arguing family or firmly planted on the ground trying to avoid the conflict. Matthew of course, was watching with keen interest.

Chief Beilschmidt's irritated expression slowly faded into something unreadable as he glanced down at Feliciano, who wasn't denying his desire with pleading eyes. Cars driving in the distance and the faint sound of leaves being tossed about in the wind were the only sounds heard besides Feliciano's restrained breathing.

Matthew glanced at Alfred, who didn't even bother to hide his expression of discontent as he grit his teeth and clenched his fist, his eyes boring into the Chief.

The Chief nodded with a light exhale of breath, and suddenly the tension was released. Roderich just shook his head and glanced away, defeated and shoulders slumped in apparent agreement.

"Kiku wants to come too!" Feliciano blurted. The Chief didn't even react beyond nodding again, making Feliciano sag with relief before reaching for a dazed Kiku.

"No one else, I'd prefer this be a private event," Chief Beilschmidt ordered before addressing the whole group. "You're welcome to visit my grandson's grave afterwards, however, I hope you can understand and respect my wishes for a personal burial."

"I really can't," Alfred muttered. Lukas didn't pinch him that time.

"That's fine," Antonio said in a light voice. "Just please be kind to yourselves because you're all grieving."

Matthew could hear the thinly veiled real message of Antonio's worry that the Chief would cause Gilbert more upset. Alfred definitely felt the same from the way he was tensing and glancing between them.

Alfred pulled a face at the Chief as he walked up beside Gilbert and leaned in.

"I guess let me know when you want to be picked up," he muttered. Apparently not quiet enough.

"I can escort him home," The Chief stated as he turned to Alfred, who refused to break eye contact and stared back. Eventually, he sighed and turned his back to the Chief as he pulled Gilbert in for a hug.

"*Seriously,* let me know if you wanna be picked up and I *will* be there."

"Thanks, you're awesome," Gilbert returned the hug. "Thanks for being such an *awesome* friend."

"No shit," Alfred said like it was a no-brainer. Like it wasn't even optional. Matthew wondered if the same sentiment would be turned towards him... or if he was just an obligation. Alfred probably preferred to have Gilbert as a brother. He never wanted Matthew.

There wasn't much else to be said that couldn't be said with glances so no one spoke as the Chief left. Matthew watched as Gilbert left with his grandfather, face more constipated than Matthew had ever seen before. Gilbert kept his eyes on the ground as he got into a car with his grandfather which followed the hearse that Ludwig had been loaded into. It was only once the cars were out of sight that the tension of the group slowly bled out.

"Fuck, Gil really should've thanked me for not losing my shit cus I swear I was so fucking close. His Grandpa's such an asshole and someone really should tell him!"

"I know, but not while everyone's grieving," Antonio added with reluctant sympathy.

"Yeah I know that," Alfred sighed. "Come on, who else wanted to fight him? Raise your hand-" A few people did. "-See? Once enough time's passed we should corner him and call him a- Steve can I pretty please have the C-word pass?"

"You wanna call him a cunt? Go for it mate, he's a cunt!" Steve chuckled and lowered his hand. "Gil's lucky to have a friend like you."

"Yeah, no shit," Alfred exacted. "We should help him stand up to his abusive, son of a bitch Grandpa."

"Clearly he's got something up his ass," Mathias jested, "I wanted to see Ludwig get buried too."

Then the conversation just degraded into shitting on Chief Beilschmidt, which was highly amusing to Matthew. But after a few minutes, it became obvious that people wanted to go home. With Mathias' friends leaving he was obliged to go, but not before catching everyone's attention by cupping his hands around his mouth.

"It's been good to see everyone!" Mathias spoke over everyone. "We need to catch up again soon!"

Not surprisingly, everyone responded with agreement and then others started breaking off.

"I'll text you, okay?" Mathias pointed at Alfred as he walked backwards. "We need to catch up."

"Of course we will! See ya!" Alfred waved.

"I'm with old mate on this one. We've gotta huge drive home," Steve sighed and cracked his knuckles. "Come on Zee, time to go."

"Aww, really? You could sleep at mine if you'd like!" Alfred sounded disappointed and exaggerated a pout to match.

"I don't think we have room, amigo," Antonio corrected softly.

"It's alright," Steve waved off, "I didn't bring my swag and sleeping in the car would probably be breaking curfew anyway. Lud would be spewin'."

"Maybe some other time then?" Then Alfred lunged to pull Steve into a crushing hug, only to get crushed right back. "I'll text you cus we do need to catch up. Lemme know when you're free!"

"No worries mate, can do. Should be sometime soon!"

Zach didn't have much of a chance to say goodbye before he was forced to run after his brother... Matthew bit his lip as he watched him go. Something had itched his brain and when he saw Zach and Matthew couldn't help but think of 'Matthew'. He pushed it down because it really was irrelevant... but if he saw his cousins again then he'd consider lingering on his feelings then.

There was a brief moment where Alfred and Antonio debated how they would get Kiku's car home before realising their friend had taken the keys with him, so with a sigh, Alfred figured they could get it for him later.

"At least Kiku won't have to worry about it and can relax after whatever the fuck happens," Alfred muttered with finality. "Who knows how they're gonna feel after cus grandpa asshole."

Matthew supposed he'd better make Alfred realise he needed a ride home, otherwise his brother might forget about him. So he walked over and leaned on Alfred's car but as Matthew waited he realized that Ivan hadn't left yet... and was approaching Alfred. Matthew paused and listened in.

"Hey," Alfred's voice lowered just a smidge. "Not now, and I've gotta look after Kiku and Feli, prolly Gil too so that's my priority. So later, alright? Give it a couple of days cus I think I'm gonna be busy. Fuck, is this what stay-at-home parents feel like? I'm never gonna be one now."

Alfred muttered the last part. Ivan's face didn't change, but he chuckled.

"There is no rest for the wicked," Ivan said and Alfred pulled a 'not amused' face at the perceived jab, but Matthew could see other meanings beyond Alfred being the wicked one.

"I won't stop," Ivan continued, his voice a little more forceful and his smile a little deeper. "I suppose I will be leading the next meeting."

"Yeah I guess you will," Alfred said with a small sigh of resignation and a frown. Matthew imagined that Alfred would like to be out on the streets tonight and probably felt cagey from his lack of *freedom*. But as always, Alfred put his friends first. "Just stay safe out there. Do some recon so you have something to report back."

With that, the exchange was over when Alfred stepped back and the (non-existent) privacy was broken. He snapped some finger guns before Ivan walked off. With his friend's back turned Alfred flicked his keys and got into his car.

Chapter End Notes

I always get nervous when I post such a big chapter. Hope y'all like it >:)

Also, someone made fanart of this and you can find it here!
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR2LGEbA/

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

> Hey y'all, sorry for the sudden hiatus. I just needed a mental break. But now I'm back and here to stay with more sadistic and devious motivation than before >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a busy week and after only seven days the funeral service was just a distant memory. Time kept moving as more unfolded.

For one, somehow, the location of Ludwig's burial had been leaked to the press. After some snooping around Matthew realized that the reporters who wrote the articles were in the crowd Chief Beilschmidt spoke to during the funeral service and everything clicked. Other reporters from that crowd also wrote articles about Ludwig, the Trail Killer, and the service, all articles released within hours of each other and dominating the news cycle. Just like that, interest was ignited again.

The Trail Killer hadn't fallen from the public eye, but his popularity spiked all over again. The city had gotten comfortable and now the fear was back along with the pressure on the police.

Matthew wanted to roll his eyes. The Chief really didn't care for his grandson's wishes, huh? In the efforts to bait the Trail Killer into showing himself, the Chief treated his favourite grandson like nothing more than a pawn. That had made Gilbert go feral and he bruised his hand from punching the floor in a fit of grief, causing the house environment to become unstable yet again. The albino couldn't handle the idea that his brother's sacred final resting place was nothing more than a public attraction. Without connecting the dots Gilbert really thought it was just by chance that the grave was exposed and his brother's name was being paraded around.

Oh well, Matthew figured that at least he got to visit the grave with everyone before the onslaught of the compassionate public started showing up en mass. Matthew had to wonder if the Chief really thought it through. Monitoring the grave 24/7 was doable but definitely an intimidating task when so many people would stop by. He saw a post on the Trail Killer subreddit of the aftermath of the grave, it was almost completely obscured by flowers with commenters remarking how busy it was.

Matthew supposed it would be less busy at night because of the curfew, and surely that must be what the Chief was betting on. That the Trail Killer would want a little privacy and some time to rub it in. That's what Matthew would've wanted, but after a lifetime of pushing down his desires, he had learnt the very valuable skill of *settling*. Going with a group of Ludwig's friends a day after he was buried was enjoyable enough and now Matthew had no reason to go back. There was nothing Matthew could say to Ludwig that needed privacy, not when he had Ludwig's last moments all to himself.

The Chief was going to be very frustrated his plan wouldn't pan out how he liked.

Matthew had visited the stolen police radio a few times since the channel went into near radio silence. That hadn't changed since. Matthew didn't know what he expected but he had to admit he

was a little disappointed by the lack of interesting content on the channel. But he figured it was still a valuable asset to have so he made sure to bring a plastic bag to wrap it in to protect it from the elements.

Apart from that, life returned to a comfortable status quo and it wasn't long after that the twins finally had the house back to themselves again. As far as Matthew was aware, Feliciano was going to move in with Gilbert because the two were really dedicated to taking on their new roles as *non-replacement* brothers. Alfred had concerns about how Gilbert would cope going back to his house but Antonio was quick to jump in and promise he'll make sure everything was alright.

Matthew wondered if Antonio was going to find himself standing on another ledge at this rate. Once again he was putting a burden on himself to make sure his friends were as happy as could be... but at least Alfred was in on it too. Maybe Matthew should say something and remind Alfred of his promise to share the burden.

But a thought abruptly came to him: Why did Matthew care? He should just be glad it wasn't him! If he was in Antonio's position... he wouldn't kill himself. He'd want to and that was something he could honestly admit and imagine, but ultimately he wouldn't because people would depend on him so instead he'd just stifle himself and keep doing what needed to be done until his brain went numb. Until he had erased himself. Only living for others and never for himself...

As was what was expected from 'Matthew'...

Did Antonio feel erased?

That's definitely not a question Matthew could ask. He wasn't close and it required too much of an explanation to even make sense. If he asked that, Antonio would just laugh him off from the face-value strangeness of it. There was no one for Matthew to talk to, no one who understood him. It was incredibly alienating and it used to haunt him just how unfair it really was for everyone else to have *someone* while Matthew's lips were sewn together.

Matthew shook it off. He hated that he was always so contemplative. It felt like because he had no real life, he could only live in his head. He spent most of his days upstairs because there was no reason to be *real*.

Except when he was killing.

Now with the house less demanding, he was left to entertain his thoughts... what could be the Trail Killer's next move?

His thoughts were interrupted by a chance encounter. Once again, he was in the right place at the right time and he found himself eavesdropping on something important.

Everyone had only left that morning and Matthew had been washing up the dishes as he got lost in thought, only to be interrupted by the doorbell. At this point, Matthew was surprised he'd even heard it. Ever since people had left, Alfred's phone would sound notifications non-stop in their absence. It made Matthew just a little bitter.

Matthew didn't know what to expect on the other side of the door, but with Alfred shut away in his room, it fell on Matthew to go investigate. He wasn't surprised to see one of his brother's friends at the door, but he was surprised to see a certain someone again so soon.

"Did you leave something here?" Matthew asked helpfully when Kiku hesitated.

"No, I have everything, thank you," Kiku said politely with a slight dip of his head. "Can I please speak with Alfred? Apologies for the unexpected visit, but I'd prefer to do it in person."

"Oh," Matthew bit back his intrigue as he tried to figure out what Kiku would want to talk about. "Yeah, you can. I'll go get him then, eh?"

Was it about Feliciano? Gilbert? *Who*? Was it important? Surely, because Kiku opted to do it *in person*. Matthew couldn't figure it out so after a few steps he paused, figuring he might as well just try to ask and turned back.

"What was it about?"

Kiku just glanced to the side as his hands grabbed for the instrument case of some sort strapped to his back, clearly avoidant.

"I would like to thank him for his patience," Kiku finally said, his voice demure. "He has been an excellent friend and I owe him my gratitude."

Matthew nodded slowly as he turned to get Alfred. He was sure it wasn't all Kiku had to say, but Matthew could always eavesdrop.

Matthew knocked on Alfred's door before opening it. He didn't want to wait for an answer or explicit permission to enter like expected because he just wanted to keep things moving. The door was dark and when Matthew flicked on the light he noticed everything.

For one, Alfred was asleep. Second, his brother had quite an impressive floordrobe which doubled as a major trip hazard. There were clothes everywhere and Matthew couldn't see the original colour of the floor but he knew it wasn't like that this morning. But it wasn't just clothes on the floor, the gaming chair by his computer was covered in clothes, only they were all black and on top of that pile was Matthew's old hockey helmet.

Alfred would have to cover up the colours and logo, otherwise if he was spotted the police could make quick work of tracking down the hockey team and perhaps even tie it back to *him*. Unlikely, since Alfred would be wearing it and not committing murder. But Matthew would still have to say something if he didn't want Alfred to make a mistake.

He woke his brother up, who was less than pleased at being awoken.

"What?" Alfred snapped, his voice drawling as he rolled to cover his eyes.

"Someone's here for you," Matthew replied, a little sharply because his brother was being a hassle when Matthew was being *nice*.

"Ugh..... wait," Alfred rubbed his eyes as he sat, more awake now. "Is it Ivan?"

"No," Matthew pointed to the hockey helmet, "Are you going to wear that when you go out at night?"

"Yeah, and? You never use it."

Matthew withheld getting irritated by his brother's attitude.

"You'll need to paint it or something. It could be identified if you get spotted-"

"Ugh, *fine*," Alfred stressed as he waved Matthew back so he could get out of bed. "I really doubt it though. Isn't there lots of people who play hockey?"

Matthew felt his face twist in annoyance. He didn't care to get sucked into an argument so he just ignored Alfred and left the room.

"Hey! Who's here!" Alfred called after him and Matthew felt pleased that he had inconvenienced his brother just a little bit. Maybe Alfred shouldn't have been so rude and dismissive, maybe then Matthew would be a better *dog* for him.

"He'll just be a moment," Matthew told Kiku, voice carefully pleasant and 'Matthew'. "Did you want to come inside?"

Kiku wordlessly stepped inside after a moment of hesitation but didn't go any further than the doorway. Matthew got the feeling that Kiku didn't want to talk to him and it made his already pre-existing irritation bubble into just a little upset.

Fine, he got it. Alfred was Kiku's friend, not his. Even if Kiku wasn't being rude, Matthew couldn't help but feel upset by the lack of warmth. He went back to the kitchen to finish the dishes with a blank face.

"*Mattie*-" Alfred's annoyed tone changed when he saw Kiku was inside. "Oh, Kiku, hey! What's going on?"

"I want to speak with you."

"Well, we're speaking now," Alfred's joking voice loudly echoed down the hall as he walked to the door and Matthew listened in. "Did something happen? You good?"

"Alfred, I appreciate your patience taking care of me. I wasn't myself and I apologise for any strain I put on you because I didn't have my emotions under control."

"Oh, uh, it's really okay dude. Seriously, you were hardly a burden. If anything you were like the golden child compared to Gilbert," Alfred laughed. "But seriously, it's okay and I get that you're upset and it's okay not to be okay, y'know? And it's what friends do, you checked in on me when Arthur died so y'know?"

"When Arthur died, I was distant. I was hardly the friend you were to me. You deserved better."

"Dude, I still knew you cared. Besides, we have our strengths and shit, right? It's fine, don't beat yourself up!"

There was some silence, but it seemed they came to an understanding when Alfred spoke again.

"So did you want to come in for a coffee or something?"

"No, I need to speak to you about something else... I want to join you."

"Uh, join me what?" Alfred chuckled nervously. "What do you mean...?"

"I want to help hunt down the Trail Killer. It is the only way I can think of honouring Ludwig."

"Oh, are you sure?" Alfred's voice was serious. "It's dangerous. Even more dangerous than before because of the curfew and this *fucker* kills *cops* now so... are you really really sure?"

"I'm certain."

"Okay, yeah, good. The more the merrier but I know I can't really stop anyone- Oh, I didn't know you played guitar."

"This is my brother's erhu case," Kiku corrected and *then* a moment later Alfred gasped loudly.

"Holy shit! One, that's so cool! Two, bro, if you get caught with that thing they're going to assume you're the killer. Holy fuck!"

Matthew was too intrigued to just listen because he had no idea of the complete picture and he wanted to know everything. Listening wasn't enough as he crept to peek down the hall.

"I won't take anyone's life," Kiku said sombrely. "But I can't let another life be taken."

"Dude, fuck yeah," Alfred said in agreement and awe. Matthew figured out the awe once he saw what Kiku had.

A fucking Katana. The erhu case was open and inside was a sword. No wonder Alfred was acting so impressed.

"But how the hell are you going to imprison the guy with *that*?"

"*Make him surrender*."

"Obviously!" Alfred laughed like it had been obvious. "Holy shit that'll definitely do the trick, the guy only has a knife so you can say 'that's not a knife, this is a knife' and whip that out!"

Matthew stepped back and bit his lip. Things just kept getting more and more intense. The thrill was back and he kept his hands busy by turning back to the dishes.

"Okay, so you're in. I'm actually catching up with Ivan tonight because he's been going out non-stop so he's got some updates. Just come along with me tonight! Just wear all black or something to blend in with and also bring a mask of some sort cus if we get spotted by police we'll have to outrun them but they won't know who we are so we won't get arrested later. If I'm going to get arrested, it's gonna be once I catch the guy and hand him over."

The mask idea was smart, and luckily Matthew would still be able to tell the difference between them all because he knew them. But that was only if he was on the streets at the same time as them. He wouldn't be, so it didn't matter if he could tell who was who.

"I'd rather avoid detection completely," Kiku said. "I want to help with their mission, not disrupt it."

"Yeah me too. I'm just thinking ahead because anyone who's out at all is gonna get in trouble so... I don't wanna get caught because then I can't help."

"I see, perhaps we'll have to consider ways to lower detection."

"Yeah, we could do that," Alfred paused. "Also, uh, I guess you figured that Toni and Gil are in on this too... but to be honest I don't really want Gil in on it. Could you maybe ask Gilbert to look after

Feli? Tell him cus you're not good with emotions, then maybe he'll look after Feli instead of going out? I think he would cus he and Feli have got really close now but I don't think Toni can stop him. Gil's just been so fucked up that I don't want him to go out and I know it's selfish but... y'know?"

Kiku agreed and the conversation came to an end shortly after, with plans to rendezvous later with Ivan.

Matthew's hands made quick work of drying the dishes as he schemed. Kiku didn't want him around just then because he didn't know if Matthew was in or not and trying to protect him. That made Matthew feel a little bit better, though he'd be annoyed if it was Alfred doing it. But if he talked to Kiku after the meeting, maybe he could pretend to be in on it - well, hardly pretend when he already knew about Alfred going out. But he could tell Kiku he knew about it and then ask for Kiku to relay information to Matthew under the guise of curiosity or concern and find out what Ivan knew... Considering Ivan hadn't been arrested yet, he must know how to avoid curfew.

Whatever he learnt would go straight to the consideration of the Trail Killer's next move. It was official, his thoughts were no longer just idle thoughts. Matthew was planning something and it was inevitable that the Trail Killer would strike again. He just needed information to inspire him and help him make educated choices.

Good thing he knew where Kiku lived. He'd just have to organize an interaction.

Chapter End Notes

I'll get back to updating every second week now so just sit tight and try to predict my schemes

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Alfred left for the night, dressed in dark clothes, wearing a black mask and holding a hockey helmet that had been painted black, he didn't say anything to Matthew. He just walked out the front door and Matthew watched him go from the corner of his eye as he continued to scroll his phone, sifting through more articles about recent events tied to the city's notorious serial killer. There was no shortage of amusement.

Chief of Police issues statement about leak regarding Officer Beilschmidt's grave

Spoilers, the Chief didn't take accountability and the whole point of the article seemed to be just to bring attention back to the grave with the sole purpose of baiting a certain someone to visit it after hours. Matthew could just smell the frustration radiating off the article.

Violinist Roderich Edelstein to return to the spotlight after revealing familial link to the late Officer Beilschmidt

Curfew restrictions set to loosen for essential workers in upcoming trial after being postponed

Trail Killer investigation said to be the police force's number one priority, after civilian safety

Police Chief reminds public that compliance with curfew is 'not optional' after tenth arrest of teenage 'rebel' this week.

Relief after curfew proves effective, sadistic killer starved off. Police expect measures will remain effective in effect.

Increase in refuges for homeless and volunteers for homeless shelters spike after city curfew imposed

Tent city ghost town come sundown, public calls for public house reform while critics claim it shouldn't take an emergency to house the homeless population

Trail Killer case becomes the most serious case in city history

Memorial plans for victims approved at site of Office Beilschmidt's death, fast-tracked for construction

When Matthew went to bed that night he enjoyed having the space to himself again. He closed his eyes but sleep did not come, only thoughts that entertained *what* next?

He wasn't going to break the curfew, but if he understood how it worked *to a T*, he could work around it with confidence. He knew he wouldn't feel particularly up to it in the early hours of the morning, so unless there was a benefit to waking up that early then he would rather find something to do before the curfew came into effect. It was just a matter of figuring out *what*.

He could just operate as he did before, killing before evacuating and letting the police deal with the aftermath, frustrated that the curfew didn't prevent it. But that was too boring and hardly a change. Sure, he could operate by the motto 'if it isn't broken, don't fix it' but now he really understood what Ludwig meant when he said the Trail Killer would *never* stop and only *escalate*.

Matthew had to really do something and he wasn't going to worry about what until he was inspired and informed.

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Matthew was lying half awake when Alfred came back, only just beating the sunrise. He wondered if Alfred was going to build up another coffee/energy drink dependency again because if his brother did this every night, he was going to crash and burn.

But why was Matthew surprised? His brother operating from curfew start to end should've been completely expected because if Matthew hadn't figured it out by now, Alfred and his friends were *desperate*. They were hurting and somehow the only solution was to take matters into their own hands. Matthew just hoped Alfred wouldn't punish him for his frustrations. His brother could be irritable when things didn't go his way and as things started to wind down and the thrill less intense, he found he had less patience for Alfred's delicate irritation.

Matthew just rolled over and mentally added caffeine to his shopping list. If Alfred started to feel the exhaustion of his decisions, then that was a guarantee he'd become more obnoxious and Matthew would like to avoid that entirely.

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It was about mid-morning and with his morning routine out of the way, Matthew could focus on putting his plans into action. He needed to speak to Kiku and find out what he could. He did consider trying his luck with Alfred but he could only see himself getting brushed off, so he'd have to find a way to meet Kiku and talk to him.

He already had a plan in mind. At least with Alfred taking naps during the day, he can't keep track of when the car was in use or what for. Matthew didn't like that they shared a car, and for the longest time, he hated the stereotype that twins shared everything when his own twin wouldn't share his company or thoughts with him. But he never had the guts to complain about the car because he felt that anything he said would either be dismissed or seen through the worst lens possible. So initially 'Matthew' didn't mind sharing a car because Matthew had no life and therefore no use for it.

Recently he briefly considered getting a vehicle of his own, but being so deep into his 'hobby' now it might only risk him getting caught. There was a chance if he had been getting around by car, he'd been caught by now. Being on foot kept him mobile and no doubt left the police questioning how he got around otherwise. Sue him, he just liked walking. It had always helped 'Matthew' clear his mind, and it sure helped him now. Especially before the curfew when surveillance was at an all time high, he likely benefited from getting around on foot.

It didn't matter now, because Matthew still had access to the car and he would have for quite some time should Alfred completely invert his sleeping hours.

Matthew drove to Kiku's house but pulled over a block short of where he lived. All he had to do was wait and Matthew had the patience to do that. He could see Kiku's car outside and all he had to

do was follow him if he went somewhere and then pretend it was a *coincidence* that Matthew was there as well.

It was a little convoluted, plus it made him feel out of his element and Matthew felt just a little bad for it. But that wasn't going to stop him. He wanted to do this just as much as he needed to.

Matthew just scrolled on his phone, indulging in more Trail Killer discussion. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long before Kiku left the house and Matthew found himself just a little bit surprised that Kiku wasn't as exhausted as Alfred. Maybe Kiku didn't stay out that long or if he did stay out all night, he was just better at hiding how tired he was.

Or, maybe Kiku just didn't want to bail on premade plans. Matthew followed Kiku from a safe distance but sighed when he realised they were going to Feliciano's. It became obvious that Kiku was helping him move and Matthew weighed up if he should keep following him or not.

But Matthew was determined to find out what he wanted to know, *today*, and until he did it wasn't like he had anything better to do. So he unlocked his phone, sat back in the car seat and waited.

It only took a couple hours of waiting before Kiku drove off and this time he wasn't going to his own, Feliciano's or Gilbert's house. Instead, Kiku went shopping. Clothes shopping. Convenient, especially when Matthew could peek into Kiku's basket and figure out what kind of mask he'd be wearing when he took to the streets.

It wasn't that hard to get Kiku to talk. Matthew started the ball rolling with small talk before jumping into what he wanted by pretending it suddenly came to him. Through the use of his tone and body language, he made Kiku keep talking as Matthew trapped him in a conversation through obligation and kept pushing for more and more. He knew how people had demanded things from him through invisible means before... when he used to bend to other's whims.

It would freak him out if done to him, but because it had happened to him *so* often Matthew knew exactly how to replicate it. Pushy people like Alfred, Gilbert, and Mathias did it all the time, hoarding the conversation and obviously draining the other person. Matthew knew that Kiku wouldn't hold it against him though, not when Matthew was so sincere and friendly about it. If anything Kiku would feel bad about it and blame himself, something that Matthew used to do.

Still, he couldn't help but give into the guilt that came from cornering Kiku so in an effort to somehow 'prove' he wasn't just using Kiku he kept the conversation going about normal things. It was obvious that Kiku was a little tired but eventually, they fell on a comfortable topic talking about Feliciano, which made Kiku relax some more and disgusted Matthew's intentions.

Still, the conversation was hardly a chore for him like some others were and Matthew meant it when he said that he was glad Feliciano was doing better and had Antonio and Gilbert looking after him. In an effort to show a little bit of kindness, Matthew thought Kiku's conversation with Alfred yesterday and reassured him that he was a good friend for doing what he could.

When the conversation finally came to a natural end Matthew's guilt had mostly dissipated but, oh well, Kiku wouldn't see him for a while after this so he won't have to worry about Matthew taking advantage of him again. Not when he had some pieces and now he knew what else he needed to know before he could start making decisions about the future.

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What he needed to know now was how the city functioned during the day, that was just as pivotal as night. So Matthew ruminated with his thoughts as he scoped out the daytime environment. He mulled ideas over and over in his mind passively, while taking in observations about his surroundings as he walked through the suburbs.

There were essentially no officers on the street when the sun was up, only the bare minimum. Definitely less than before the Trail Killer had begun terrorising the city, so Matthew had to wonder if the entire police force was going to be clocked on *come* curfew.

Matthew figured it out once the sun set and the sky started to dim. Suddenly the streets were swarming with police presence, so it would seem they were active from dusk to dawn. Smart. He could see the effect it had on the population. Suddenly everyone was nervous and the streets cleared of civilians quickly after.

But between sunset and curfew start, Matthew had a taste of just how many officers were on the streets and it was *a lot*. If these officers stayed on through the entire night, it almost seemed like an impossibility to be out during curfew. He didn't know how Alfred and his friends did it without feeling incredibly nervous and compromising themselves. Surely one of them would crack under pressure like this.

But that confirmed it, whatever Matthew did, it wouldn't be during curfew. No better way to rub in the Chief's face than that despite all these precautions, the Killer still adapted. The Trail Killer was *opportunistic* and the best opportunity was during the day when there were no officers around...

But how?

When it came to him, Matthew knew. Inspiration came to him in the form of an old comfort.

Not all civilians left the streets between sunset and curfew so Matthew felt it wouldn't be too strange for him to keep walking around... which was how he came back to where it all began - the park.

As he began walking the familiar trails surrounded by familiar trees that blocked the lights of the ever-glowing city... he set a hand on a tree by the path where Arthur had died, running his fingers over the rough dented bark he had carved so long ago with his vengeful knife... when he had been grieving his place in the world.

Matthew realized he had all the pieces. He knew what to do.

If the areas the police were covering *now* were areas they'd remain in until curfew ended... then the park was just one massive blind spot. No one was here. The park, its bushes, its trails and paths, *everything* was empty. There were no civilians and not a single police officer.

It seemed so stupid... Until it made sense.

If police were covering areas all around the park, why would they need to observe inside? Especially when with the curfew they'd catch anyone who went in or out. If the police thought he'd only escalate, then they must assume that he wouldn't come back to the now *boring* point of origin, instead always searching for greener grass.

Matthew felt lightheaded as he kept walking around in marvel, his mouth dry and fingers tingling. The park wasn't under any surveillance. And why should it be? He hadn't killed in there for a long

time. Culturally it wasn't a place people went in often since he started... minus the thrill and clout chasers. But did the police just think there wouldn't be any victims to find here? Or was it just incompetence? An oversight?

Did it matter? Even if patrols swept through once the curfew started... the park was a big, dense place, anything left behind wouldn't be found if hidden properly and Matthew had no intentions of being out when curfew was on.

Matthew got it. Inspiration had struck.

And with it came an unbearable urge to *indulge*... Matthew didn't even want to try and hold himself back. The sooner he started, the better.

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Matthew hummed as he poured himself a coffee late the next morning. He felt as bright as the sun outside, shining in the blue cloudless sky.

Alfred came in, groaning long and loud and unmistakably like 'fuck'. He was practically folding himself over with the way he hunched and his hands hung from his face in a desperate attempt to shut out the light.

"Aren't you up early?" Matthew asked. "You only got back six hours ago."

"'m fucking hungry," Alfred mumbled as he stumbled over to shut the blinds with an arm hovering over his eyes but didn't look like he had the strength to hold it up. He blindly grabbed for the blinds with his other hand and tugged them roughly before staggering to the kitchen.

Matthew slid his coffee towards Alfred, not at all envious about how his brother would have to adjust all over again.

"This might help," Matthew tapped on the mug to call Alfred's attention to it.

Alfred snatched it and skulled it with desperation like he had just been rescued off a desert island.

"I feel like a blob..." Alfred groaned, which was interrupted by his phone making a noise. Alfred groaned again but just went back to drinking.

Matthew knew his brother didn't put his phone on silent when he slept and he could periodically hear it from behind his brother's door. Matthew wondered how Alfred could sleep with it on, but then reminded himself just how dense his brother was. Maybe that was why he didn't need to put it on silent... but Matthew thought it was more plausible that maybe it was just in case it rang. Alfred would be too paranoid to miss anything should his friends need him.

Alfred opted for keeping his eyes shut and taking a seat by the counter before promptly using the cold bench to support his full weight with a sigh. His wrist looked like it would give out from the force which his head was slumped on it and his only concern to stay awake was to drink more coffee.

"Why don't you go back to bed?" Matthew suggested. As far as he was aware Alfred had no plans that would be interrupted by him sleeping all day.

Alfred just made an unintelligible noise but gestured with the coffee cup.

"-I've got shit to do," Alfred finished, only the end of his sentence understandable. His phone kept dinging and Matthew considered telling his brother he could set it to go silent from any hour of his liking while still letting phone calls come through. The only reason Matthew didn't say anything even when the phone kept being annoying was because explaining something like that to Alfred when he was in that state was likely more effort than it was worth.

"Did you want to check that? What if it's important?" He suggested instead because it could be and he was curious. Matthew couldn't guess who it would be, there were so many people it could be, perhaps even multiple, but someone clearly loved Alfred.

Plus, a sleep-deprived Alfred was more likely to overshare things he'd usually keep hidden otherwise and Matthew was in a good mood today and felt like he could amuse anything.

Alfred finished the mug, tipping it back and somehow unbothered by the thin brown streaks dribbling down his chin. His eyes were still closed as he reached into his pocket, his phone obnoxiously dinged with another notification as he did so.

"I bet you 10 dollars it's Mathias," Alfred slurred as he opened his eyes and couldn't stop blinking, he held the phone to his glasses and strained his eyes to focus-

"Eyyy, what a surprise!" Alfred cheered lazily. "Gimme 10 dollars."

"I gave you coffee," Matthew shrugged as he took the mug and put it in the sink for later, before turning the coffee machine back on to make himself one. "What does Mathias want?"

"Uhhh," Alfred glanced to the side with uncertainty, as if he couldn't even remember. "I didn't text him back. Oopsie."

Made sense. Alfred had been busy since dusk last night... From the way he was struggling to look at that screen and keep blurry eyes open, Matthew figured Alfred wouldn't be texting Mathias for a while. Alfred pushed his glasses back with the force that he rubbed at his eyes, sighing slowly as he did.

"Was it a long night?" Matthew probed.

"No, I had energy drinks... I just get paranoid, y'know?"

"Paranoid?" Matthew cocked his head. "Of what?"

"I don't even know." Alfred shrugged. "Isn't that the worst part of horror movies? You don't know things and that's why it's scary? The unknown?"

Alfred groaned again, this time in frustration of not being able to articulate himself so well.

"I mean- well, who knows what that sick fuck's gonna do next..."

Oh, Matthew did. He turned around to hide his feral smile when he thought about the irresistible inspiration and poured himself a new mug of coffee.

Even if he couldn't fix his face, he took a sip of his drink before clearing his throat to sound appropriate as he went to comfort Alfred.

"But you don't know if anything-"

-A call. Alfred's phone was ringing, making the owner jump to look at the caller before breathing out deeply, seeming much more awake after that scare.

"...Right," Alfred groaned out and went back to rubbing his red eyes. "Man, I'm really behind on all this shit..."

"Who is it?" Matthew questioned but Alfred didn't answer, too busy making noises of indecision as his finger hovered to either answer or hang up. Matthew couldn't think who it could be that Alfred would want to avoid-

Alfred picked up, his tone immediately changing.

"Hey Steveo! What's up man?"

Alfred's tone was upbeat now and Matthew found his brother's signature hero act of 'everything's fine' amusing. Especially when he laid it on thick for his favourite cousin.

Alfred had the phone on speaker which let him drop his arm because he was too tired to hold the phone up. Convenient for Matthew to listen in though.

"Nothing much," Steve replied in his usual laid-back tone, "you?

"Um, late breakfast," Alfred spluttered. "Why are you calling?"

"It's just easier, y'know?"

"Yeah, yeah," Alfred was nodding, a bit stupid when it was a phone call but he didn't seem to pick up on that. "So whatcha calling about?"

"About having another bash!"

Alfred's face seemed to freeze as his mouth stalled.

"It'll be easier to hash out the details over the phone, ay?" Steve continued.

"Uh, yeah, I didn't forget," Alfred chuckled, having apparently forgotten. "But are you sure we should have a 'bash'? Cus I don't think I've got enough time for something big like that, y'know?"

"Yeah, maybe we'll save a bash for a special occasion but you don't always have to have a reason, ay?"

"Yeah," Alfred agreed a little too easily. "In fact, I dunno if you should sleep over at all... Cus uh, I've been going to bed really early recently so it'd be pretty boring for you so if you come up maybe it could be a day thing?"

Alfred traced his fingers on the bench as he negotiated and Matthew had to wonder why wasn't Alfred letting Steve in on the truth. Clearly, because he didn't want him to know but Matthew couldn't imagine why. Did Alfred just want to keep everything tight-lipped between those who were actually participating? Did he think Steve would be against it?

Either way, Matthew felt a sense of importance for knowing about it when Steve didn't. He knew that was stupid.

"Yeah, could come up for a day but come on, might as well crash at yours," Steve said cheerfully, not picking up on the fact that Alfred wanted to slip out at night.

Alfred looked conflicted and seemed to silently debate it with his face.

"Yeah, sure. As long as you don't mind if I go to bed early, then I'm sure I can find you some room in the living room to sleep over."

"No worries about that. I'm sure there's enough room to set up two swags!"

"Two?" Alfred questioned, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to concentrate. "Um, I meant that I'll sleep in my bed in my room. You don't need to bring an extra 'swag' for me, dude... whatever the fuck that ɪs... I swear I know what ɪt ɪs..."

If Alfred hadn't screwed up so efficiently so quickly, Matthew would've jumped in to stop him from making the mistake of questioning the number. Unlike his brother, he had connected the dots much quicker because he had access to the *thinking* part of his brain.

Luckily Steve just laughed instead of taking it badly. Matthew could only hope that Zach wasn't with his brother on the other end, otherwise Matthew could only imagine that either he'd be severely crushed... or he'd be used to it...

"For Zee you knobhead! He's pretty keen to catch up with ya too."

"Ohhh, yeah," Alfred cringed. He slapped a hand on his head and let it drag through his hair as his tired eyes fluttered with frustration. He forced a laugh. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't sleep well last night."

"It's alright," Steve laughed, clearly not holding a grudge. "I can tell you sound tired. Have you talked yourself into going to bed early because you've had one too many nights at the pub or something cuz? If so, good onya for trying to make a change."

"Yeah, that's it," Alfred jumped onto that excuse before quickly backtracking. "Well, not *exactly* it cus of the curfew so I'm not going out. That'd be illegal. I'm just addicted to YouTube so I stay up all night on that and I'm trying to stop."

Matthew leaned on the bench, sipping on his coffee and continued to eavesdrop as the conversation steered into casual talk territory about the pitfalls of addiction.

It would be interesting to have Steve and Zach over. Strangely Matthew found himself looking forward to it despite the potential hindrance to his plan. But he figured it was just his good mood talking. Besides, Alfred would be the one entertaining them when Matthew went out and he would be back before Alfred snuck out. There was no risk for Matthew there.

When Alfred hung up half an hour later, he let out a big sigh of exhaustion.

"Geez, what have I got myself into," he groaned and flopped back down, head hitting the counter. "I'm going to be so addicted to energy drinks after all this."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, you can start theorising about what Matthew's scheming if you like. You'll see next chapter, so there won't be too much of a wait to find out!
But I would like to clarify, while this sure is an evil plot point... it's not *the* plot point that I'm so keen to get to. I have something ✨worse✨ in mind >:)

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew waited until the afternoon before slipping out of the house. 'Slipping' was misleading, Alfred was taking another nap before pulling another all-nighter so Matthew just walked about the front door. He wanted to be back before Alfred woke up and nightfall arrived, and more importantly, before the entire police force emerged and started their prowl.

He knew it seemed he had imposed a time limit on himself but Matthew knew he would be all wrapped up before then. Right now, he had a few hours to do what he intended to, and he intended to enjoy it.

So equipped with all the necessary gear Matthew made his way through the streets with keen eyes and a sharp mind. The night before he didn't sleep well. All he did was scheme and replay his plan over and over as he fine-tuned it to perfection. He knew what he needed to do and how to see it through.

But still, it was something *new*. He couldn't help but be slightly nervous. But he knew that was just anticipation because once he thought it he needed to do it. Now he knew the specifics and had the experience to pull it off.

There was hardly any risk that couldn't be negated by his experience. It was an ingrained habit to walk with his head down and turn away from cameras, doing everything he could to blend into the scene and leave no impression of his existence. That was something that came naturally... or rather, something he had learnt over the years. Perhaps in another universe being reduced to a wallflower wouldn't come naturally to him.

Matthew walked the streets, posture altered to blend as he watched the world around him, waiting. Once comfortable with the environment, he went straight into the park. Ideally, this would be where he killed. It would be too inconvenient and risky to do it outside the park and *then* drag a body in. That would get noticed, no matter how much Matthew got ignored.

It was a nice afternoon. Slightly windy, causing a rustle in the trees that Matthew figured he could use to his benefit because it made things just a little bit harder to hear from a distance. He kept walking calmly until he was far into the park and couldn't hear the bustle of the city. Now he was in his element and all he needed was an opportunity. Then he saw one.

Someone was jogging through, alone, wearing headphones and didn't have some kind of high tech Fitbit or something on his wrist that would track his vitals. Matthew watched the man run and after a couple seconds of assessment, he could see this man was perfect. Matthew geared up quickly, having brought a small backpack with him. First, he took out gloves - his usual cleaning ones that he would never go without. Then, he slipped on a pair of leather ones, if only to hide the cleaning gloves. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt now tucked into the gloves. Something specific to his plan that he was glad he had foresight for.

Then he took out a dog leash - A modified dog leash. He hadn't done anything sinister to it... well, not inherently. All he did was tip a bucket of water outside and mix it into the ground until he made mud before dropping the leash in it. It made it look used and worn. All part of the gig.

Just like his namesake, the Trail Killer was extremely familiar with the trails that weaved through the park and Matthew ran to cut the man off ahead of the route he was certain his victim was taking. Then he jumped onto the path and ran like he had been running from the other way.

"Hey uh, sorry!" Matthew called out, letting himself pant and lean on his knees. "Sorry, uh, I don't suppose you've seen any lost dogs on that side of the park?"

The man stopped and pulled his headphones around his neck, giving Matthew his full attention. Perfect.

Matthew had put some thought into what he was going to say. Just asking a question like that shouldn't seem too suspicious since he wasn't asking a favour. It wasn't like he was asking for the man to *help* look for his dog. The latter was always portrayed as the classic ruse that a predator would use and so that would be a *little too* 'nail on the head'.

"No I haven't, sorry," the guy said, his shoulders heaving a little out of breath. "But uh, I could keep an eye out if you'd like?"

"Yeah that would be great, thanks," Matthew smiled back.

"Well, good luck with the search," the guy said as he put his headphones back on his head and went to take off again.

The dog leash wasn't just for the ruse. It was for action too. Escalation meant ever-evolving, and Matthew's new plan had no room for stabbing. A little unfortunate when the act had become something like a relief to him, but it was too messy and would certainly leave a trail that would lead to what he wanted to keep hidden. Just as the man went past Matthew and turned his back to him, the Trail Killer sprung into action.

He had looped the dog leash through the loop at the end, reminding Matthew of a noose. He slipped it over the man's neck, catching him and he pulled tight. Instinctually, the man's hands tried to claw at Matthew's arm but his shirt stopped that. He'd have to cut the fingers off if he let someone scratch his DNA with their fingernails and he wouldn't even know what to do with the fingers after. Bury them?

It was just easier to not make a mistake in the first place. Matthew had always been careful.

At least if the man's hands were uselessly clawing at the tight biting leash then they weren't grabbing his phone. Matthew had one hand ready to slap it away should the man realise that his window of opportunity was closing but he could still take action. Matthew had to act quick and render the man unconscious as soon as possible. But that wasn't to say he didn't enjoy it, because he did. Even if he was goal-oriented, the feeling of power that rushed through him was *addicting*. He didn't even realise how much he missed it. Only now being so hands-on, it felt so much more intense.

The man was making gurgling sounds as his mouth opened and closed, gasping like a fish. He appeared to either try and scream or reason with Matthew, only to words came and his eyes bulged in horror.

"Don't bother," Matthew said. "It's going to be quick anyway. There's nothing you can do, eh?"

The man's clawing became weaker and his fingers clamped down with less force. Matthew felt himself have to use more and more strength to hold the man up as the fight left him and he crashed... as the man went limp, Matthew was filled with a burning sense of satisfaction. The man stopped moving, his hands dropped limp by his sides.

Matthew held the leash in place for a few more minutes and he relished the feeling of the body paling. He only undid the leash and slipped it into his backpack once he was sure the man would never wake up. The park was silent as Matthew hooked his arms and lifted the body, moving onto phase two.

Matthew had an area in mind and walked with purpose as he felt the rush of power that came with moving the heavy corpse. As the Trail Killer and just an overall reclusive outcast, Matthew had spent a lot of time in the park and knew it very well. Though now he had to carry what appeared to be an unconscious person *at best* in broad daylight so he'd have to be quick. But thankfully, that part went off without a hitch. Once he was in the location, far off any of the paths and extremely secluded, Matthew could let out a breath of relief because now he had time to do what he wanted. Not that there was much left to do.

He may have had to change his MO, but he wouldn't lose his signature. Never that, because that would tie everything together nicely in the end and give him the credit he deserved.

Matthew lay the man down and found his phone, still connected to the Bluetooth headphones and removed both from the corpse as he stepped back. Matthew turned the collar of his shirt up and set the headphones around so they wouldn't touch his skin, and then he slipped the victim's phone into his pocket. He would have to dump the phone and headphones somewhere else, otherwise, it could be tracked to this location. He didn't want this new sacred ground to be found anytime soon, not when he was so excited to build up his ambitious project of collecting a personal graveyard...

He stared down at the body on the ground, the man's eyes half-lidded and unfocused, staring somewhere at the sky above. Matthew took his signature switchblade from his pocket and knelt down to carve his signature mark on the man's forehead. Interestingly, it didn't bleed the same way when his victim was still alive (or rather, actively dying). That wasn't to say it still didn't look nice and didn't fill him with satisfaction, making his lips twitch up as his eyes traced the mark. He wiped the blade off on the guy's shirt before he stood up and after one last look, went on his way.

Phase three, he needed to dispose of the evidence - the man's belongings. He followed the path it looked like the guy was talking, jogging all the while. Even once he left the park he ran for blocks, habitually avoiding the focus of cameras until found the best place to dump the phone. He turned off Bluetooth before leaving the phone and sitting face down on a bench, that way it would look like it had been forgotten and there was a chance it would get stolen. Then he calmly walked away until a couple of blocks later he saw an open dumpster to toss the headphones in. He pressed his collar back down as he made his way home.

Of course, the phone would be found. It was only to hinder the police from pinpointing *where* and *when* it had been separated from its owner, nevermind *how*. As far as they needed to know, this was just a missing persons case. Not a murder by an infamous serial killer...

It felt so good to be back in action again. Part of him just couldn't wait to skip to the end. His big grand plan was for the Trail Killer to strike during the day and hide the bodies in the park, so they wouldn't be found until later. Much much later - whenever he decided. He wouldn't stop until he had made a mass graveyard in protest of the curfew. The curfew that *would* stay and would *only*

seem *more and more* unnecessary as day by day *nothing* happened and there was *nothing* to report. The public would surely feel uneasy... or perhaps comforted but the police would definitely feel frustrated. Matthew couldn't wait to hear all about it through Alfred being exposed to Gilbert, who had the unfortunate fortune of being related to the Chief of Police. Or, at least it was fortunate for a certain serial killer...

Matthew felt so excited he couldn't contain the thrill as he thought about his grand plan. He couldn't stop repeating the idea, eager to find out just how high of a number he could reach. Just how many people he could kill and dump into a graveyard of his own? The bigger the number, the more extreme the excitement. He couldn't wait to get started. This would be his most ambitious project yet.

He knew waiting for inspiration to strike would be worth it, and with a little effort, he managed to force down the feral grin stretching across his face.

Chapter End Notes

This is not the big evil plot point. Well, I guess it is an evil plot point, but not the big one that I can't wait to get to. But now that I'm typing, I see it might be a couple of chapters yet before I can explicitly put it into action or at least slowly bleed it in...
>:) enjoy

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I had to add an extra week to update because there's things going on that are definitely controlling my life but that's okay, I will persevere.
But just in case I'll say it'll be another 3 weeks before the next update and after that I'll go back to my regular fortnightly updating

I also might've gotten a bit carried away this chapter. I tend to get caught up on logistics so I thought by making clarifications about Matthew's plan I would prevent plot holes... except I may have just made him look more like an unsympathetic monster... oopsie, not that it would be a wrong assessment of him, but still.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, no plan was perfect, but Matthew wasn't against making some adjustments to his plan because he was nothing if not *flexible*.

His original goal was to add to the growing body count every day and slowly, over time, the numbers would add up to a horrific scale, something that would truly shock the city and go down in history as something to *never be forgotten*. Something that would ensure he could never be *erased* again and there would be nothing the media could ever do to ignore him and his actions that haunt the city.

But the problem was if he struck every day with the current plan, people would soon be noticed as missing. It wasn't normal for adults to disappear at the rate he was planning to achieve...

At least not adults of *that* demographic... and there was always the risk of creating a scene if he couldn't find a convenient victim and went too far trying to make it happen, so it really was in his best interest to rethink.

So Matthew adjusted. It wasn't long until he thought of the solution, especially considering his unique perspective on being overlooked...

The solution was cruel, but no more vicious than Matthew had become by letting himself go. Caring about what others thought of him was something that plagued his past self, and no one was going to learn about what he was doing. The only person alive left to pass judgment on his actions would be himself, something which Matthew wouldn't do, not when he was also the only person alive to know how he had been *pushed* so far. Even if no one in the world seemed to care about him, Matthew would always be sympathetic towards himself. As 'Matthew', he did what he had to, even if he despised it. And even now, he was only doing what he had to do.

And he was adapting.

Even in the face of the curfew, there were still homeless people around. Sure, there were shelters they were expected to go to at night, but during the day, none of them wanted to stay somewhere

like that. Instead, preferring to wander and loiter on the streets. Perhaps they were the only people who rivalled Matthew in invisibility... perhaps that was the reason he seemed to be the only person to ever notice them.

Matthew had noticed them early on when he became the Trail Killer, but once he noticed what areas they had stuck to, he thought it was just best to stay away. He had figured that they wouldn't be noticed if he targeted them and once he had moved past his personal vendetta and started going after anyone, his intent was always to make a splash, not fly under the radar and someone killing the homeless wouldn't get the reaction he had wanted... except now that could work in his favour.

So Matthew altered his ruse and turned his focus onto the most vulnerable and invisible of the population. He hardly had to adjust his plan at all and everything fell into place.

He would find someone who wasn't sitting with a pack and pretend that he didn't have time to search for his dog lost in the park, offering them money if they found it. A lot of money, too much for them to even consider saying no.

Everything about his demeanour was calculated and precise, and his tone and body language were refined to get the *exact* result he wanted. Then he'd imply that he had pitched his ruse to a lot of the homeless population and followed up with the forged explanation that he was asking the homeless because he knew they would have the time as anyone else he knew was busy. Then he'd walk off out of view to spy on his target.

They *always* took the bait.

Matthew would follow them to make sure they didn't talk to anyone on the way there to say where they were going. If they did, then he'd have to abort because the stakes were higher than ever and he didn't want any loose ends. But in the face of competition for the prize money, his target never would. It made things easy for him because his victim was walking themself to the park for Matthew to collect.

Once in the park, it was too easy to go through phases two and three of his new routine. It was sad, but he knew that no one would care if his victims didn't make it to the shelter in time for the curfew. There probably wouldn't even be the assumption that they were breaking it, they just couldn't be *noticed*. If anything it was all too relatable... and did leave him with a pang of sympathy.

But he needed this more than he had sympathy. His ambition came first.

Every day, Matthew would go hunting and would always be home well before the sunset and the streets were flooded with officers. There'd always be a pep in his step as the thrill coursed through his veins at the satisfaction of his growing project. It had quickly become the highlight of his day and the only thing he thought about when he drifted off at night alone in the quiet house, sparing no thoughts for his idiot brother and friends searching the streets for a monster that couldn't be found.

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It was nearly dinner time when Matthew came home one day to an obviously annoyed Alfred. At first, Matthew assumed that Alfred was hangry because *Alfred and food*, but he picked up that wasn't the case when his brother was furiously typing as if in some kind of argument.

"Fuck, calling really is easier," Alfred growled as he seemed to switch between who he was texting every few seconds just to continue typing. His fingers *had* to be jammed up by now and Matthew was surprised that Alfred's lip wasn't bleeding from the force which he was biting it with.

And since Alfred was muttering at a speaking level, Matthew figured he was just *begging* for attention and trying to bait Matthew into asking-

"What's wrong?" Matthew didn't even bother making his tone nice or concerned, instead just outright asking. He wasn't a coward but he wouldn't play into Alfred's attention needs. This was for the sake of curiosity and information, something that Alfred seemed happy to let slip.

"Yeah, so, it turns out that Gil's going out again!" Alfred spat out with frustration. "Fucking hell..."

Matthew withheld a sigh. How was that a surprise? Unless Alfred really thought he did something that would keep Gilbert in at night... As long as Alfred didn't take it out on Kiku for apparently not guilting Gilbert *enough* to keep him under control.

"And so that means that Toni needs to stay with Feli *alone* because obviously, Feli can't find out what we're doing, so that's putting more stress on Toni who obviously can't say no and feels like shit cus he can't do anything about Gil and can't stop him or look after him," Alfred continued, because Matthew was only here for him to rant at. "I get that Gil's hurting but what if he's hurting too much for this shit and he gets himself hurt!"

Figuring Matthew could be nice, he tried his best to put Alfred's worries at rest.

"Gilbert will be fine," Matthew said confidently to convince Alfred. "There's so many officers around and no murders so far, so nothing will happen to Gilbert, eh? If anything he'll just get as exhausted and paranoid as you."

"That's not the point!" Alfred grunted rudely. "Just- ugh. Don't fucking worry."

Alfred shoved his phone in his pocket and brushed past Matthew, clipping his shoulder.

"Just stay out the way if you don't have anything helpful to say."

Matthew could feel a dark look cross his face as his eyes narrowed on his retreating angsty brother. He just *had* to go and ruin Matthew's good mood...

There were still a few hours of daylight left... Matthew wordlessly grit his teeth as he bit back his anger and walked with purpose towards the front door. While one murder a day was a steady rate, if Matthew wanted the biggest number possible he was going to have to put in the work. Something he was happy to do when Alfred *always* pissed him off.

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The site stunk after a week. Matthew really shouldn't be that surprised. Rotting corpes had a tendancy to smell foul but someone Matthew felt like he underestimated just how stomach churning it was. Maybe that was because he got the thrill from the kill and never bothered to stick around once his victim's eyes went dull.

But fortunately he was cautious and knew to factor the diseased rot into this plan. It couldn't be smelt from any of the walking trails, no matter how fair the wind carried it the site was especially

chosen with his inspired goal in mind. He picked a spot shrouded with trees and bushes and in a mini valley of the terrain, so he was confident that the wind wouldn't pick up on it. Plus it was a very secluded spot that would be hard to stumble upon for any reason, not until Matthew was ready to share with the world.

But he was faced with something he forgot to consider. The bodies would rot and the skin would fester and melt, taking his signature with it.

Matthew stood over his small collection so far with a hand pressed over his mouth as he thought. As long as the presence of his signature was there in some sort of unmistakable way, surely the police wouldn't have any doubts, even if the mark itself wasn't easily seen on the corpses... or at least the older, more degraded ones.

So Matthew stole a trail marker on the opposite side of the park and brought it to his graveyard. He stabbed it into the ground and used the knife to get some blood from his freshest corpse before smearing it onto the sign with his signature while thinking *there, that should do it*.
No one would read into the missing sign too much. Anyone would just assume some teenagers stole it for the thrill of it, because of the connection to the moniker 'Trail Killer'.

Matthew looked over the bodies dumped. It brought him a sense of peace staring at them, finding satisfaction in their unmoving and silent nature. But ambition still nagged at him... and he felt a little nostolgic for his earlier days.

It would be nice to add someone he knew here.

But who?

He closed his eyes. All he could hear was the gentle breeze in the trees as his thoughts roamed through the years of mistreatment he endured... there were so many people who had wronged him and so many who would deny it. Most of those faces had been present at the funeral...

There had been a lot of people he didn't like there... lots of people he would love the opportunity to cross paths with because they *inspired* him... all he had to do was take his pick and figure out a way to make them *disappear*.

Maybe it was time he stopped finding all his victims through luck alone. For the first time in his career... maybe it was time to turn away from his passive hunting style and get a little more... proactive.

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It was dark when he got back home, but still plenty of time before the curfew started. The moment he stepped through the door he was forewarned of Alfred's persistent annoyed attitude when he heard a loud, exaggerated sigh. Matthew felt his face so blank as his wall of wariness went up. He wasn't going to let Alfred's moods get him down, not when his own mood was up from the release he found in his previous activities. Besides, Matthew had some time to think about what he should do during his walk back home and he wasn't going to shoot himself in the foot when he needed something from Alfred.

"Okay, first of all, you should've told me there were leftovers so you can't get pissed off at me about this," Alfred grumbled from the living room, tone still pissy from the incident the other day but his

brother apparently too lazy to come over and confront Matthew about whatever issue he was going to blow up about now.

Matthew walked into the living room to see what Alfred was talking about and found his twin brother lazing, sprawled out on the couch with his phone in one hand and a half-eaten piece of pizza in the other. Matthew could see a family-sized pizza box sitting on the arm of the couch and Matthew distantly worried about the potential for grease to sink through the cardboard box and stain the furniture. A valid concern in his mind, but not one he could verbalise without Alfred calling him a *nag*.

"I saved you a slice," Alfred grunted. Matthew gingerly lifted the box lid to see a singular slice sitting on what was once a full pizza, only evidence of being there at all being the circular stain discolouring the cardboard.

"You can have it," Matthew said, keeping his voice light like he *wanted* Alfred to have it because 'Matthew' was *kind*.

Alfred just grumbled as he sunk into the couch.

"Yeah, I *should* have it. This is my emotional support dinner because I have to deal with *so much fucking shit*."

Matthew just nodded as he tuned his body language as much as possible to be supportive as he thought about his angle to get what he wanted. But he really was glad that Alfred wasn't making everything into a big deal. While it was obvious his brother was annoyed with everything, Matthew saw it as a more 'exhausted, given up' kind of mad. It was certainly a relatable feeling, and also a potential gateway into getting what he wanted.

"I know, you must be really tired from everything that's weighing you down," Matthew said sympathetically, "maybe you should stay home, just for tonight. That way you'd be able to catch up on rest and you'd feel better tomorrow, eh?"

If Alfred stayed here, then so would his phone. Matthew needed Alfred's phone because that device would have everything he needed to know about his potential targets and help Matthew make an informed decision on *who* to hunt and *how* to go about it.

"Yeah, *right*," Alfred scoffed. "I'm *not* gonna do that so don't even ask."

Alfred narrowed his eyes and muttered to himself about his situation being different to Gilbert's and Matthew ignored it, instead deciding to drop a potential argument and just see if Alfred would forget his phone. Matthew knew that his brother had taken his phone while patrolling before the curfew, but since the tightened regulations were put in place Matthew didn't actually study how his brother operated so he had no idea if Alfred would take his phone. If he was smart he wouldn't... but that wasn't a word Matthew would use to describe his brother.

Instead, Matthew just wandered into the kitchen to reheat some leftovers for his own dinner, leaving Alfred on the couch to obsess over his phone. Matthew turned his own focus inside his head as his body piloted itself.

He already had the same three faces pop up in his head when he thought about making something personal. Well, there were way more than *three* when he closed his eyes, but Matthew had

narrowed it down and once he had Alfred's phone, he could narrow it down definitively. Whoever had the worst luck by being the best, most available target.

Ivan.
Roderich.
Mathias.

Matthew couldn't wait to have one of them take their last breath in his arms, going limp in his hold and watching their eyes lose focus as he told them exactly what he thought of them... exactly how horrible they really were and how they were to blame for *all of this*.

Just thinking about it brought a smile to his face that he had to fight down. Not that Alfred was paying attention, he never did. Maybe it was time for Alfred to replace his glasses because sometimes Matthew thought it was obvious that there was something *just* not right about himself.

Not that he'd have it any other way because right at this moment he was overjoyed just by thinking about strangling someone who had treated him like shit for years.

But who should it be? Matthew could speculate and come to a conclusion without Alfred's phone, then use the information on there to back him up and find a route to his final destination...

Ivan. Intimidating and not easy. If something went wrong and his target caught on, Ivan wouldn't show it and Matthew would certainly lose. But perhaps, it would actually be really easy. If Matthew pulled off pretending to be his brother, someone Ivan apparently trusted... Matthew could lure Ivan to the park and take him off guard once disarmed. But maybe Ivan was too close to Alfred to be worth it right now... and Ivan was predictably unpredictable.

Roderich. Related to the Chief of Police so probably a little harder to get to, let alone take anywhere. The man was too stuck up to negotiate with so he'd never make it to the park. Sure, Matthew could kill him with his old method instead and leave him to be found... but Matthew was intent on flying under the radar and giving the police *nothing*... so the Trail Killer would *not* make an appearance until Matthew was ready. Roderich was too impossible at the moment, no matter how satisfying he would be. Surely Matthew would have an opportunity for everyone on this list and more later...

Mathias. Matthew probably didn't even *need* to act as Alfred to lure him to the park. Mathias was impulsive and definitely could be convinced to go anywhere, especially the 'creepy, Trail Killer' park if suggested... Yes, Matthew liked that idea. It was the most plausible and achievable so far.

Mathias it was, now Matthew just had to learn everything he could about the guy before 'running into him' and propositioning that they check out the park.

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Curfew was approaching and when Alfred got changed to leave, Matthew withheld a frustrated sigh when he saw his brother walking out with phone in hand. He quickly took a breath to reset himself before what he had to say came to him.

Still, he couldn't help but be a little disappointed at what he thought was obvious.

"Alfred, are you really taking your phone with you?" Matthew said in a tone of concern. It was effective because it made Alfred stop, giving Matthew an opportunity to follow up - cutting Alfred

off before he said anything else.

"You do know that your phone will ping and register to the cell towers when you're moving around, eh?"

Alfred froze with his mouth open, prepared for a retort before snapping it shut as he realised what Matthew said.

"Fuck. Are you fucking kidding me?" It seemed Alfred was so stressed that he only took it in annoyance, running a hand through his hair and *pulling*. "Great, does that mean we're all fucked?! Cus I don't exactly have it on me when I go out but if I go out with it at all on me does that mean I'm gonna get arrested and-"

"No, Alfred, if you haven't been arrested yet you're fine," Matthew said, reassuringly. "Just leave your phone here just in case."

"Are you sure it'll be fine?" Alfred was starting to get worked up. "Cus what if they check the towers- *what if they check the towers cus they're looking for the Trail Killer and they see us just fucking running around everywhere and-* fuck, Gilbert's asshole grandpa is gonna fucking be *so* pissed and-"

Matthew couldn't hear any more of this and withheld a sigh.

"Alfred, the police would've already thought to check the cell towers, even before the curfew. They would've wanted to know who was in the area of each murder and if the same person popped up for all of them, that would've been their biggest suspect. They also would've checked the cell towers on the first few days of the curfew because they profiled the Trail Killer would break it then."

Alfred had been upset at missing the first few days of the curfew since he was putting his friends first, *like* always, but now it worked in his favour by keeping him off the radar.

"Oh shit," Alfred ran a hand through his hair before darting back to his phone. "Does that mean they're onto Ivan?! Fuck, maybe I should've made Ivan wait- Fuck, I've gotta tell Ivan..."

Alfred started texting furiously and Matthew grit his teeth, annoyed *that* was all Alfred took from what he said.

"So you'll leave your phone here?" Matthew only half phrased that as a suggestion.

"Didn't you just say that it doesn't matter now?" Alfred snapped, not even taking his eyes off his phone.

Matthew wanted to growl, clearly, there was no winning here.

"Alfred, taking your phone is too risky! What if the police check the cell towers again?"

"Well it doesn't *fucking* matter, *does it*?! Cus I've already *pinged* all over the place, *haven't I*? What if something happens and someone needs me?! Or if I need to call someone, *huh*? I'll just take it with me and everything will be *okay* once that Trail fucker is behind bars-"

While Alfred kept ranting, Matthew felt a wave of acceptance wash over him, washing away the tension in his body and his urge to fight. He knew when to pick his battles, and he wasn't getting what he wanted right now and he could feel himself give up.

Temporarily. Not that Matthew or the Trail Killer was about to just *give up*. No, an idea for a better way came into his head and Matthew was about to let his current objective go.

Alfred would come back tomorrow and go straight to bed. Then, once he fell into a deep sleep... Matthew could take his phone then. Matthew didn't have to push now, even if he'd like to have all his plans in order, Matthew was patient. A virtue forced upon him from a young age.

So it was only a matter of time until he'd get what he needed and until then, he could fall asleep to daydreams of holding Mathias against him as he drained his victim of the energy to fight...

"Okay, you're right, Alfred," Matthew said abruptly to shut his brother up. "You should go, you're wasting time. Goodnight Alfred."

That caught Alfred a little off guard as he suddenly tripped over his ranting and stumbling over words. Apparently, the change in mood ruined his rant and made him feel a little guilty for it, which, *good*. Matthew wasn't about to do the 'Matthew' thing and reassure his brother that everything was okay and Matthew wasn't upset, so instead he turned around and walked to his room.

"Uh, goodnight," Alfred said, delayed and reluctant with a hint of guilt in his voice. Clearly, he realized he was being a bit of an asshole but because his urge to get outside already was stronger, Alfred had no time to follow up on Matthew.

Matthew let out a sigh once Alfred shut the door and left, leaving the house quiet and peaceful. 'Matthew' would feel guilty for not immediately reassuring Alfred and making sure *he* was okay and didn't feel bad about the consequences of how he was acting... Before, Matthew would've felt paranoid and uneasy at the idea that now Alfred was mad at him.

But Matthew felt okay. Felt good. Felt powerful.

Fuck it, Alfred can feel whatever he wants to feel, Matthew didn't give a shit.

Everything *actually* felt okay when he lay in bed that night and closed his eyes and sleep came to him easily.

Chapter End Notes

Also to take a break from writing I tried my best to make a playlist for this fic so hopefully all the songs fit the vibe
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/44WbEeahWFSNQzV2tqZfLe?si=fKQYefzmQlKYDstLB35kkA

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew was kneeling on Ivan's stomach, digging his knee in as his bare hands wrapped around his former bully's throat. All of Matthew's effort went into choking, straining his arms as much as possible as he turned his fingers into vices. Ivan was struggling, desperate eyes bulging as his hands uselessly clawed at Matthew's arms. Ivan's gasping mouth couldn't say a single as Matthew spat hatred at him. He taunted his victim and watched on as Ivan's eyes lost focus and began to roll back.

Roderich was in front of him and Matthew was holding a violin bow. He lunged at Roderich, whose face morphed from judgement to terror as Matthew strung it taunt around Roderich's neck. Roderich begged and pleaded, wheezing for air that Matthew wasn't going to give. As his victim went slack, Matthew dumped stuck-up Roderich with the rest of the 'scum' that the man thought he was better than Matthew's only disappointment was that Roderich didn't know where he ended up.

Unless...

Roderich was standing before Matthew's mass graveyard, and Matthew was holding the bow with a look in his eye that told Roderich everything. Then he killed him.

That scene was perfection.

Matthew lay in bed, half awake and entirely comfortable as visions of violence repeated over and over, bringing him a sense of morbid comfort and delight.

Mathias was easy to lure to the park. Matthew brought Mathias to see the graveyard... and watched as Mathias stopped finding them 'cool' once he realized he was about to become one. Matthew strung the dog leash around Mathias' throat and tightened it until blood was biting the edges of the ligature.

He was so consumed with replaying the dreams, over and over, that he had no idea what time it was. It had to be early because Matthew heard the front door, a sign that Alfred made it another night without being arrested. Good, otherwise getting that phone would be difficult...

The TV turned on. Loud. Matthew furrowed his brow as he was pulled from his dreaming and fully woke. Only a few seconds later Alfred cursed and then the TV volume went down. Matthew sighed deeply as he started the day.

Alfred was sitting on the couch hunched over like a dead spider curling into itself, multitasking between the TV, phone, and keeping his eyes open - the latter seemingly a challenging task by itself. Matthew appraised his brother's condition, wondering if something *had* happened because not only did Alfred seem more tired than usual, but he went to the TV at the first opportunity instead of the fridge or bed.

To add to the curiosity, there was still a desperate energy about his brother because, despite his exhausted movements, Alfred was still twitching with purpose.

"Do you want me to make coffee?" Matthew asked.

Alfred jumped.

"Uhh," Alfred apparently struggled to think about it, fighting with himself to figure out the answer. "Uhh, yeah."

Matthew just backed away to make the coffee after sparing a glance at Alfred's phone. His brother was texting a mile a minute and no doubt autocorrect was doing all the heavy lifting when Alfred could barely see the words but wasn't letting that hinder him.

Without Alfred looking at him, Matthew's face fell back into his blank default. He poured their coffee silently, listening to Alfred's excessive yawning and the TV in the background. Without looking, he knew it was the news channel, leaving him with a nagging feeling.

"Did something happen last night?" Matthew asked as he brought his brother the coffee before sitting next to him, hoping to trap him in the obligation of conversation. Matthew knew that Alfred wouldn't feel guilty at all for just standing up and walking away. But after last night... Alfred might just indulge him...

"Ugh, I don't fucking know," Alfred muttered, annoyed to be distracted from texting. 'Matthew' would've felt like shit for being a burden, but now he only cared about digging and *not* Alfred's mood.

"What's wrong?" Matthew asked pointedly, voice concerned to bait Alfred into answering. "Did something happen?"

Something definitely went *differently*, because Alfred was acting differently.

"I don't know! I'm just trying to figure it out!" Alfred huffed. Matthew let his eyes drift over to see he was getting into an argument with Gilbert if the paragraphs being sent between them meant anything.

"So what *do* you know?"

Anything he heard from Alfred would be helpful and Matthew might be able to piece it together himself. Because what could've happened? *Not knowing* was making Matthew apprehensive. Especially if the police changed something and Matthew needed to know-

"Just that there were *a lot* of cop cars around this one block- well the whole suburb really- *but* way more than usual so fingers crossed no one's been *fucking arrested*," Alfred muttered, never taking his strained eyes from his phone as he switched between texting every vigilante. Despite Alfred's excessive texting, neither Ivan or Kiku had texted back.

"I'm sure everyone's okay, maybe they just didn't take their phones with them, eh? Maybe the police just thought they had a lead on the Trail Killer?"

"*Nope*, cus I tried so hard to scope the surrounding area in case that's what the cops were doing but I saw *nada*."

That could sound like someone got arrested instead, but Matthew wasn't about to admit that.

"Maybe there's just a normal reason, like a normal emergency happened? And because there's a lot of police maybe they all had nothing better to do than respond, eh? Or maybe it really was a false alarm? I think the police are pretty desperate to find the Trail Killer so maybe they just overreacted?"

"Well, I tried to figure out what was going on and hung around for ages but I didn't- oh thank fuck Kiku's safe." Alfred distracted himself texting Kiku and Matthew sighed as he sat back on the couch.

"So, what else do you know?" Matthew pressed.

"Nothing else, that's why I turned the TV on cus if the police actually wanna be honest now then they're gonna have to say something."

Matthew just nodded and took out his own phone while Alfred continued to text. If Ivan had been arrested, then the police would surely make an example out of him, giving them no motivation to hide it. There were a few more minutes before the news cycle started so Matthew scoping online.

It seemed that there were a few rumours of something happening. Of a whole squad of Police cars combing the streets, all without sirens or lights. Everyone online was churning with speculation and alive with all sorts of paranoid theories ranging from the underwhelming to the extreme. Matthew couldn't help but be amused because it was almost as if the internet *wanted* it to be the Trail Killer.

"Well, Kiku doesn't know shit either... maybe I *am* just on edge," Alfred laughed as he ran an uncoordinated hand down his face, making his glasses fall off his face and into his lap. Alfred just glanced down like they offended him. "Maybe nothing happened and I'm just that desperate for something to fucking happen already cus seriously! Not knowing's *seriously fucking me up*! I guess I can get why the cops are doing all they can."

Matthew didn't tell Alfred the internet was on his side too, the majority paranoid and anticipating.

"Yeah, I understand that you *want* it to be something fucked up, eh? You feel that it *is* because you're getting so worked up... but maybe it isn't?"

Alfred just groaned in response, throwing his head back against the couch as he slumped his full weight. He only moved to grab his glasses and put them on once he heard the news program start.

The news reporter went through the usual morning greeting script, voice friendly, serious and completely awake while Alfred could barely keep his eyes open.

"They're gonna talk about it first right?" Alfred huffed impatiently. "Especially when it's a big deal? I mean, they'll have to tell everyone what happened so people can stay safe."

Matthew also hoped they'd air whatever was happening on TV. That would be a treat for him, especially when some part of him did miss wandering around the streets late at night.

The news reporter cut right to the chase.

"To start off this morning, the Chief of Police has a statement to announce. Chief Beilschmidt."

The screen cut to the Chief of Police, standing on the stairs of the police precinct looking very serious and intimidating. All that did was give Matthew an edge of anticipation because something

had to have happened for the Chief to make a statement.

Was it a change in policy? Patrol? *Curfew*? Was it really just that someone was arrested?... There had been people caught breaking the curfew already but the police hadn't arrested anyone whose *intent* was to play vigilante. Had the police learnt that idiots were trying to take the law into their own hands, they'd definitely disapprove.

Reporters were swarming the Chief but with a brief motion of his hand and usual stern look, they were silenced as the Chief disregarded the pleasantries and spoke.

"I will not tolerate the speculation of rumours that will no doubt begin to fester. I will confirm that there was an incident last night during the hours of curfew, though that incident will not be made public. The police are not at liberty at the moment to divulge information at this time."

The reporters scrambled to speak simultaneously but the Chief raised his voice.

"*I will be taking no questions at this time*."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Alfred shifted in his seat.

"Maybe they don't even know what happened or they're still investigating?" Matthew said half helpfully, half questioningly. Surely it meant they hadn't caught a wannabe vigilante otherwise they would've said so. But maybe they *spotted* one and thought it was the Trail Killer and didn't want to panic the public?

But again, why not just say that? Why not admit they had a potential sighting? Especially when they were paranoid and it would justify the ongoing curfew to the public.

"However," Chief Beilschmidt continued, voice as hard as the look in his eyes. "We are certain that the deranged serial killer known as the moniker 'Trail Killer' is *not involved* and would like to reassure the public that our measures have been effective."

Matthew definitely saw the man's eye twitch.

"Fuck," Alfred cursed as he opened up his contacts again. "Fuck. If it's not the Trail asshole then what is it? Fuck, Ivan..."

Alfred started muttering as he tried to call Ivan, twitching his leg restlessly as he dialled.

Matthew didn't have an answer. Worse that the police wouldn't tell the public... Was it really that they didn't have enough information? How were they certain it *wasn't* the Trail Killer? Matthew forced his bouncing leg to still. The familiar feeling of others deciding he wasn't worth letting him in the loop plagued him.

And as much as he wanted to obsess over finding the answer and acquire more pieces of the puzzle... he knew he shouldn't be getting distracted. He needed to put it aside to pursue his goal of getting Alfred's phone...

Alfred's call went to voicemail and he groaned agressively before leaving a snappy message.

"Ivan, fucking text me that you're okay alright? It's gonna be really awkward if I have to call your sister because you've gone MIA, 'kay? Bye."

Chief Beilschmidt continued to talk, blunt as ever.

"I would like to remind the public that curfew compliance is mandatory and our investigation into the sickening serial murders is our top priority."

"It could be Ivan cus he just brought up that everyone has to comply, again!" Alfred stressed.

"In addition, the memorial will be completed by the end of this week and the ceremony will be open to the public. Information can be found on the police and news websites..."

"This asshole might as well just tell Gil and Feli 'fuck you' already," Alfred spat at the reminder that the Chief *still* planned to use Ludwig's loved ones as puppets to try and catch his killer.

Matthew knew just how stressed the police were and how badly they wanted him caught. He also knew he could fly under the radar for the ceremony and as long as he didn't visit the memorial after that, the constant surveillance would never see him once.

But speaking of Gilbert...

"Maybe you should see if Gil knows what happened last night? Even if he didn't see anything he could always ask his grandpa and might find something..." Matthew suggested.

"Fuck yeah, I'm gonna," Alfred took to the idea immediately and started texting.

Chief Beilschmidt continued to talk.

"That's all I will divulge on the matter for now. There will be a live interview tonight where I'll discuss the Trail Killer and police efforts. I encourage the public to tune in then."

"Oh Gil told me about this," Alfred sceptically glanced at the TV. "But I thought it wasn't gonna be so soon... are they gonna try and distract us or something?"

"Or maybe it's just to update the public about their investigation. Everyone's been asking a lot of questions and everyone's scared, eh?"

No doubt it was another method to try and catch him or alter his actions. Matthew would watch of course, but at least he would be smart enough to see what they were trying to do. Were they going to give him misleading information and bait him?

"I'm so freakin' paranoid they're gonna do another cover up," Alfred muttered. "Fuck- Gil you're so annoying."

Before Matthew could ask, Alfred gave up on texting and just *called*.

"*Was*?" Gilbert's voice was sharp and annoyed but Alfred cut him off.

"Why don't you wanna ask him?!"

"I already told you why! *Scheiße*, why is everyone always *on me all the time*!? That *arschloch* Roderich won't shut up about how he thinks *I* leaked Lud's grave and Toni's not fucking talking to me anymore and now you're trying to make me talk to that *hurensohn*! He won't tell me *shit*! He talked to Lud, *not me*!"

It actually sounded like Gilbert was about to lose it as his voice cracked, yet Alfred didn't seem to pick up on that or care as he kept pressing and Matthew had to bite the inside of his cheek to not react.

"Can't you at least *try*!? What if it's *really important* and what if he's gonna cover it up by doing that interview!"

"He's not going to. He owes it to Lud!" Gilbert barked.

"So you think he's actually gonna tell the public how the investigation is going and stuff?" Alfred was annoyed but losing steam.

"I don't know what he's gonna do, I don't care what he's gonna do, just leave me alone!" Then there was a noise on the other side of the phone.

"Is that Toni? Can you put him on? Gil, put him on-"

"Yeah! I'm fine, don't worry," Gilbert said away from the phone, tone controlled and guarded. "Al's just being nosey about stuff... I know, I'm sorry... I'll be quick..."

There was some more talking before Gilbert returned.

"Feli says hi."

"Oh well tell him I say hi back I guess," Alfred sounded like he was crashing hard, physically and mentally. "But seriously, why don't you just *not* go out just for *him*? You know you're being a complete asshole to Toni too right? He just wants to be there for you too and of fucking course he's not talking to you, he's exhausted cus you're making him babysit Feli-"

"*Shut up.* It's not like that." Gilbert's voice was twisted in anger and guilt. "*What happened to doing what we needed to?*"

Then he hung up.

"Well fuck you too," Alfred let his phone fall from his hand as he slumped. Then when it *dinged* he groaned and reached for it again, always a slave to his friends.

"Oh... it's Ivan. Guess he's not arrested or whatever." Alfred read the text with dead eyes. "Apparently he had to hide for a while and got stuck in a dead zone to not get spotted by whatever was happening... doesn't know what happened either. Fucking helpful..."

Alfred wiped at his eyes and yawned.

"Maybe you should just sleep it off?" Matthew said softly. "Everyone's just on edge from a long night and maybe you'll get some answers from the interview?"

Personally, Matthew was interested in what the Chief had to say. But there was a lot he could do today before then and he couldn't wait to get started.

"Fine, but only cus I might actually fall asleep sitting up like some kind of geezer," Alfred mumbled, using the couch to stand before staggering to his room.

Matthew watched him go, before reaching for his brother's phone that he had conveniently left behind. Patience had paid off and now it was time to find out everything he could about Mathias and type notes into his own phone. His address was easy to find, but now Matthew had to research his routine, habits, anything and everything he could. After all, it paid to be prepaired and cautious.

He went through all of Mathias' social media and nothing surprised him. Everything that Mathias posted was 100% aligned with his exuberant personality, which did give Matthew a brief sense of FOMO.

Especially when he saw the sheer number of texts between him and Alfred...

At least they were entertaining, some of them included Mathias telling an amused Alfred how he texted Gilbert about their mutual dislike of Roderich to try and cheer him up. There were lots of memes about the city's current climate and lots of discussions about the Trail Killer, though Matthew could tell that Mathias was oblivious to Alfred's personal stake in the game. There recent texts where Mathias really wanted to talk about whatever incident happened last night and wanted to know what Alfred made of it.

Distantly, Matthew felt bitter reading them knowing he'd never have something like this, but he pushed that aside and thought of his goal.

Mathias was sprawled on the ground, limp and almost lifeless, limbs too heavy to resist and weak eyes staring up while Matthew stood over him. Mathias couldn't speak, tongue fat and unresponsive. Matthew knelt down and finished the job.

Then everything was alright.

With a plan in mind, Matthew could indulge investigating what happened the night before. After scrolling online and getting nothing new besides the speculation, excitement for the interview and hope new Trail Killer content, Matthew figured he had another option left.

He snuck into the woods and found the stashed police radio.

Something must've happened, because there was more daytime activity than usual. Of course to his annoyance, the police were still acting strictly professional on it which didn't give him many clues, but what did clue him in was the part of police jargon he could understand. They were still talking about the same area that Alfred had referenced last night...

Well, it was nowhere near the park so Matthew had no reason to feel nervous or *threatened*, but he still couldn't help his burning curiosity. Did the police think they found something? Unlikely, since it was far from his new hunting ground and while he did pass through that area in the past, he had never slipped up before-

Oh.

This could all just be a play to make him *think* it's something and act on paranoia, slipping up and giving the police a lead.

...

He sighed and put the radio back, mentally shaking his head at how he had become so consumed with uncertainty.

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It wasn't until mid-afternoon that Alfred emerged from his room and headed straight for the coffee machine. Matthew had been in the middle of making dinner so he'd have time to engage in his *hobby* before the Chief's TV interview and gave Alfred a small smile.

"Sleep well?"

"I guess," Alfred grumbled as he waited on his coffee. "Hey, where's my phone?"

Matthew pointed to the couch, Alfred just groaned as he wandered over to get it.

"You know, I don't even give a shit about whatever happened last night..." Alfred mumbled groggily as he squinted to check his phone. "But I think I'm just gonna start leaving my phone at home cus now you've got me paranoid."

"Sorry... but better safe than sorry, eh?" Matthew replied sympathetically. "So, any updates?"

"I don't know..." Alfred was typing quickly. "Mathias lives close to where the police were doing whatever and he said that cops have blocked the whole area off and won't let him in."

Maybe the police were hoping that whoever was extra pushy about finding out what happened last night was a good suspect for being the Trail Killer. Anyone lingering nearby or a little too keen to talk to the police and find out would be on their radar.

"Mathias says that someone probably died-" Alfred abruptly looked at Matthew. "Fuck, if someone died does that mean that the cops just lied to us about the Trail Killer being involved? Fuck!"

Alfred muttered the same thing as he typed exactly that to Mathias.

"Okay, yeah I guess," Alfred muttered as he read the reply. "Sure, maybe if someone died it wasn't the Trail Killer. But what? Did someone jump or something? What if no one died and Mathias is just thinking of the worst? Man, I'm so fucking sick of this *asshole killer* making everyone paranoid!"

"Maybe you're worrying a little too much, eh? Just wait to see what the Chief says in the interview. For all we know it could just be another scheme to catch the Trail Killer," Matthew fought to keep the knowing smile off his face. "Why don't you just put your phone down and take a warm shower?"

Alfred considered Matthew's reasoning and slowly started to nod.

But then he still had to be stubborn.

"What if something happens though? I kinda need my phone y'know."

Matthew internally sighed. Why ask him that? Why was he always stuck with the draining labour that was other people? Alfred didn't need *his* permission to alter a *kind suggestion*. Clearly, Matthew was having a passive day since he was being kind at all. He quickly convinced himself it was necessary so he wouldn't feel ashamed.

"Well, you can put your phone on the sink? The point was you need to take a break. You're worrying way too much you know..." Matthew sighed as he added more *care*, just to be *nice*. He

was going to take a break himself after this but first, he had to get out. "If someone died then the police would've told us because they want to be transparent with the public now and have our trust. I really think they're just doing everything they can to bait the Trail Killer into getting caught."

Alfred sighed deeply and visibly relaxed, before nodding and going to shower. The second the bathroom door was shut, Matthew let his face drop as he went straight for his room and grabbed his usual backpack hidden in there. It was time for him to get some release...

And after that, he would start canvassing Mathias' neighbourhood while avoiding police suspicions. It was only a matter of time before his hunting was personal again...

Chapter End Notes

>:)
Please lmk your theories

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

> A little late but better late than never. I feel like the chapter could've been a little better and a little more concise but eh, I don't have the time to keep editing in paranoia so enjoy >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chief Alaric Beilschmidt knew his cramping hand was smeared with ink, his coordination had long lost its usual precision from the duration he had been seated at his unforgiving desk. Yet he continued to work. He had no choice in the matter.

Alaric was long overdue for a break that would never come. In his peripheral vision, he could see the camera crew working to set up on the other side of his office, but he paid them no mind. Other things demanded his attention.

His workday had begun hours before his usual schedule after he was awoken by a harrowing phone call in the early morning hours. Since then there hadn't been a moment's rest. The hunger pains and weight under his eyes had faded through sheer stubbornness as more and more demands found their way onto his overloaded plate.

More often than not he felt like a machine, one built with only the directive to work. All that concerned him were the never-ending demands. There was no rest for the ever-grinding cogs inside his mind as thoughts plagued him relentlessly, always reaching further and churning to find new angles of matters he *needed* resolved.

Nothing brought him peace.

His few hours of sleep the night before hadn't done him any favours. Still, he resolved to confront the events of the night before *once* he had completed the interview and put it behind him. Alaric was holding too many threads, loose and unfinished but he was determined to tie off the threads in his hand before picking new ones. Unfortunately, he did not have the luxury of time on his side.

As stress ate him alive and every time he thought he put a matter to rest a new one popped up. Each worse than the last.

With the repetitive motion of the pen in his overworked fingers, Alaric couldn't help but feel like someone else was piloting his body, puppetting each motion as he watched himself passively from another perspective.

All that mattered was the *conclusion* and therefore *solution* that came with mulling over thoughts... even if some thoughts only existed to torment him. *Ludwig*...

Alaric's wrist involuntarily tensed and his pen dug into the paper, leaving blotchy strokes on the report from last night and the only thought that came to him then was it was an immense shame that Ludwig wasn't there to give his input.

Since the beginning, his grandson had sat across him in his office long outside of his shift hours to discuss the Trail Killer investigation and determine the best course of action. No matter how the discussion, the pair of them went over every little detail they knew to an extent one would only describe as an obsession. Over and over until they had a plan to execute.

The seat across his desk was empty now. Alaric hadn't had time to move it.

If only he said something then. Alaric knew his grandson was burning the candle at both ends and wearing himself thin in a virtuous attempt to lighten Alaric's workload... and all the Chief had done was silently appreciate it and take it for granted.

He should've said something.

Ludwig was tired. Hardly a surprise he wasn't at his best...

Alaric could feel his teeth straining under the pressure of his jaw.

He *should've* said *something*.

Anything.

Someone cleared their voice and Alaric blinked, finding instant relief when he stopped forcing his hand to move as he glanced at the source of the sound.

His glance was more a slight glare, though he didn't see the need to hold back, not when Augustus was standing right in front of him.

Alaric had specifically selected his... acquaintance to fill the role of reporter for the interview. If only because of his nature, or what was left of it after his own personal experience with the Trail Killer.

Well, not only for his nature but also his competency. Or just perhaps it was because he was the devil Alaric knew as opposed to one he didn't. Alaric couldn't leave anything to chance, not when he needed results.

"Hey, are you ready yet? Cus we are," Augustus grinned as he leaned onto Alaric's desk. The Chief glanced down to see his papers being pushed with the motion.

"I'll be there in a moment," Alaric said curtly, breathing out a breath of relief when Augustus didn't linger and turned back to the camera crew.

Alaric didn't hesitate, silently reaching into his desk and taking out a bottle of pills.

Ever since Ludwig died, Alaric couldn't manage his chest pain or ever present headache without the aid of medication. It irked him that even his own body was insistent on becoming an obstacle. After taking the pills, Alaric stood slowly, withholding a grunt of ache as gravity was particularly unforgiving after sitting for so long.

"Did your editors receive my email?" Alaric spoke as he moved to sit in front of the camera, keeping his face blank as he found relief in being seated again. Despite the painkillers, the ache in his back was something he couldn't shake.

But that wasn't something he was going to show. He had an image to uphold.

"The one about the criteria?" Augustus winked at the poor crew member who had the job of fixing a microphone onto their shirt. "Don't worry, it's been revised. But we'll still let you see the footage before it airs 'live' tonight."

Alaric gave a single nod and sat back as a microphone was attached to him.

Nothing was live if it could be manipulated, and Alaric felt no guilt for resorting to any measures possible to achieve long overdue *justice*. With each night that he got less and less sleep, dry eyes staring at the same ceiling as shadows lingered in the corner of his vision, testing his sanity as they warped into shapes that made his jaw tense... Alaric came to the conclusion that he was desperate. He was reaching his limit. With each passing day, he surprised himself with how much weight he could take on his shoulders without his knees buckling. But no matter how many hairs turned grey, his resolve never wavered.

One day, this city would be free of the terror that ruled the streets.

Alaric would personally ensure it.

It was a time like this that Alaric wished for the counsel of his grandson... after the events that unfolded the night before and disturbing implications... But now was not the time to admit uncertainty about how to proceed. *If* putting the Trail Killer and investigation in the spotlight again was the way to go with the new development.

He tensed his jaw again, his teeth painfully grinding. One of his molars had been aching as of late and it only added to his frustration.

Guilt was a familiar and all consuming feeling. His measures to catch a killer backfired, he *wronged* one grandson who he can *never* bring back and left things *fractured* with the other. Thinking about Gilbert always left him with conflicted emotions, the most prominent always changing as if he were spinning a wheel of *mis*fortune. Alaric wished he could set Gilbert *right*, now that he was without a brother. But Alaric didn't know how or where to start, so his time was better spent in the office. Crawling towards a goal that at times, seemed more challenging than the fate of Sisyphus.

The cameraman counted down and the Augustus practiced contorting faces to find the right one. Alaric didn't need to, after so many years, it came as second nature to project authority. This interview would be broadcast on every channel, every station, and then posted online for the world to see. The Trail Killer *would* see it... along with the police's new problem. But Alaric refused to think about it now, hoping he wasn't shortsighted for trying to confront the problem head-on and cause more problems in the process.

Alaric forced himself to be in the moment. One thread at a time. At least with this 'live' interview, he can control the narrative. Regain some ground. Win one battle in this never ending war.

"Camera's rolling."

Augustus took a breath before through the introductions, somehow managing to balance both being friendly and serious. It was like he had spent no time away from work at all...

Alaric took a breath to refine his thoughts and keep them on the task ahead; strategically sharing information with the public... and anyone else watching.

Don't think of LUDWIG.

Or GILBERT.

Or LAST NIGHT.

And how he SHOULD'VE done MORE to prevent it.

ALL OF IT.

"So, Chief Beilschmidt," Augustus leaned in and Alaric made a point of not reacting. "Can you share with us your career history? How did you come to be the Chief of Police? It's such a prestigious position, so I don't doubt you're *extremely* capable to have gotten this far."

Augustus was contorting the script a little much into something phrased casually for Alaric's liking, though he didn't expect rigid professionalism from his choice of interviewer. Augustus was a newsreader with celebrity-like status. Until he took leave, the whole city tuned in to watch their favourite reader charm them with his blatantly inappropriate personality for a workplace, in Alaric's opinion. Though he had to acknowledge that there was a reason Augustus held his beloved position for so long.

Alaric reminded himself that choosing his former enemy/rival for this task was nothing more than a measured chess move.

He didn't want to reminisce about their past and the funny way things have changed. Nor did he want to think about their unique and cruel situation.

Alaric didn't want to think at all.

"I have been the Chief of the city's precinct for the past twenty years and it's been incredibly rewarding. I take pride in maintaining peace and order, no matter the threat. Before I was Police Chief, I was a federal agent, so I guarantee I'm certainly qualified for this position and am more than capable of eradicating any problems that threaten to disrupt the peace."

"You were a federal agent?" Augustus' eyebrows shot up, acting for the camera as he went along with the script. "That's certainly not a job for the faint of heart. Though can I ask, why the change in career path?"

"I chose to step down and work locally to raise my grandsons when their parents... passed."

He didn't like talking about that, but it was a calculated move that would garner sympathy and humanity in the public's eyes, and allowed segwayed into-

"I'm sorry to hear that... and I'm so sorry for your recent loss... Officer Ludwig Beilschmidt was your grandson, correct?"

Augustus knew that was the case, the script left it as a question. But what was *not* a question was the genuine look in his brown eyes that Alaric refused to meet. Refused to see the emotions that only left a bad taste in his mouth.

"He was." Alaric sighed deeply as his jaw locked up. He forced his mouth to move, *clear* and concise. "He was a good officer, one of the best. That is an objective fact."

His jaw locked up again, though Alaric felt like he had already said enough. What more needed to be said? What more could he, when suddenly his mind went blank and there was nothing more to say?

"What are your thoughts on your grandson's grave being leaked to the public? That can't be easy, not so soon after his passing..."

Alaric sighed sharply.

"I'm disappointed about this outcome, but nothing can be done about it now. I can only urge the public to treat the site with respect should they visit, and not break curfew to do so..."

Mentioning the grave again along with the curfew might get a killer to visit and be caught... Alaric could only hope his problems would come to an end soon.

"...with the completion of the memorial in a few days, my wishes are the same."

That would have full-time surveillance, both in person and cameras covering every angle. Because even if a murderer doesn't show up outside of curfew, the Chief *knew* that on the day of the ceremony, he would be looking out into a crowd that his grandson's killer was hiding in.

That thought made his jaw lock again and his heart palpitated in what he could only assume was fury. He fought to keep his face presentable. There would be a time for his anger.

"Is the curfew still necessary?" Augustus continued. "Do you really believe the Trail Killer will still seek out more victims at night despite restrictions?"

Alaric needed to do something about the curfew and knowing it was being broken only invited the ever turning cogs of his mind to consider how to enforce *more* effectively, despite knowing that being too controlling would only make him lose the respect of the public. Yet he still found himself considering the extreme measures…

He was a practical man. If there was a problem, he thought of the solution.

Though there was a silver lining; the curfew had in fact worked as intended and the Trail Killer seemed to be *dormant*… for now. That monster was adhering to the curfew, which was frustrating and relieving but completely *unhelpful*. Surely the serial killer was satisfied with the stunt pulled that sparked the need for the curfew, and likely wouldn't come back immediately unless the Chief baited him. Which Alaric had attempted to do over and over and had yet to yield results...

And now Alaric may have created a new monster from his efforts to subdue the old one.

"We are talking about someone who has felt confined and suffocated by rules his entire life. This curfew is to limit the victim pool and protect the public," Alaric said forcefully, hoping his intensity would deter the public from treating this trivially. "I will only refer to the moniker out of *necessity*, to distinguish and identify the biggest terrorist in the city. However, I do *not* endorse the moniker as it only *glorifies* him."

The only benefit of the moniker was public engagement, which had been the only reason Alaric had been tolerating its public use. But now... He had worried too much about how it would empower the Trail Killer he didn't think about alternative outcomes…

But first, the interview.

It was nothing but a mind game and his only intent of condemning the moniker was to project feelings of rejection towards the Trail Killer. Alaric had hoped he would take the bait, but that feeling of assuredness was only felt when the script was being written. Now, it left him with a pit in his stomach. To learn more about the Trail Killer... he loathed that it would require more bodies in exchange for information because that killer was definitely not *sloppy*.

Unless of course the Trail Killer showed up at Ludwig's grave, but Alaric wasn't a man who indulged delusions.

"So, if the curfew failed, what other options do you have left to explore?"

Alaric would not be inviting the FBI to take away the case, no matter how eager they would be to snatch it away from him and claim credit. He couldn't, not when it was so personal now and Alaric couldn't even bring himself to visit his own grandson's grave, curfew or not. And he didn't need the FBI, not when he had the very same skill set combined with local knowledge of his own city, making him more qualified. No, he didn't want the feds taking over, not until he had exhausted all his measures and he *had* plans and measures to put in place.

Alaric answered cautiously, stressing his competence, FBI experience and connections. The question was planned to make him look competent, reassure the public and intimidate the Trail Killer... and hopefully, any other problem that suddenly has abhorrent and morbid inspiration.

But he kept the details of measures he had left to himself. He wouldn't give away his hand until he saw the response of this interview, if there was one at all. Before he even remotely considered the FBI... his last resort would be the military. When he really couldn't take it anymore and all control was lost, the military was the perfect way to escalate without extending the hours of the curfew.

"So it would seem that the Trail Killer is an enigma?" Augustus continued, moving along the discussion.

"Actually, we know exactly what kind of person we're dealing with," Alaric said, tone level and eyes staring intently into the camera. "All we're missing is a name and face."

With a profile so exhaustive, the police were only one step away from ending the Trail Killer's reign of terror. That's what brought him the most frustration.

"How can you know so much?" Augustus leaned in, body language attuned to demonstrate as much interest as possible. Alaric had to commend the talent of a professional actor. Despite their history, Augustus was chosen for a reason and that reason was to perform for the public.

With a strong expression, Alaric explained the basics of criminal profiling for the camera, before going into the details of Trail Killer's profile. Everything was calculated with the intent to intimidate. He kept his gaze level as he articulated each word slowly and surely, every word controlled and delivered with purpose.

Because he too was performing, filling the role of the closest authority to a God with absolute reach and unquestionable power and no serial killer could evade him forever. He needed the public to believe in him and in the law. He couldn't afford a mishap now.

"What we do know, is that we're dealing with an individual with *psychopathic and sociopathic* tendencies." That was putting it simply with shocking words to elicit an image... in reality, there was a thick stack of speculative reports trying to label the Trail Killer with a diagnosis, but he didn't intend to overload the public with that information. That was a measure he could reserve should he need to escalate and put pressure on the Trail Killer later.

"All of these victims only exist to serve a goal. The Trail Killer cannot empathise with them, not like we do. His goal is purely to seek *attention*, something his chosen method highlights. Slashing a victim's throat is messy and attention grabbing. Like an arsonist, he is rewarded by the public's reaction to his abhorrent actions."

Alaric's tone never wavered.

"This individual is highly disciplined and focused. He's always looking for the right conditions and if they aren't right, he'll move on until they are. He needs to kill, but he has self control. Initially, there were large periods of time between activity but in more recent months, the cooling-off period is shorter with no effort to hide what he's doing, because he enjoys it. That indicates he's becoming bold. It's a cycle and it feeds his ego."

Alaric could see Augustus was nodding along with everything, but the Chief focus was staring down the camera as if he were making eye contact with the Trail Killer himself.

He reminded himself to reel it in. Despite his own turbulent emotions, he needed to show restraint. Though that thought was tempted by the idea that his grandson's killer would be getting off on any emotion Alaric slipped.

"One of the conditions is operating at night, by removing that option he should have no option but to stop but it will make him frustrated. But this is only one obstacle so he will break it. Too many obstacles and too much frustration, he could go on a full-on rampage."

Should that happen, both the Chief and the Trail Killer knew it would be an instant game over for the serial killer. A rampage is the opposite of *careful* and *concealed* and would ensure the Trail Killer's reign of terror would come to an *abrupt* end. Both the Chief and Trail Killer knew it would never come to that... even if Alaric felt that he would only find relief in pulling the trigger himself and ending that monster.

He needed to keep his thoughts relevant and on the interview. Since the Trail Killer would be unable to hunt, it was highly likely he would either be canvasing or revisiting locations of his old scenes. Alaric had already discreetly ordered more security around the locations of every murder so far, both in person and digital. Anyone showing up to more than one site where a victim died would be flagged immediately. Then of course, there was Ludwig's grave and memorial...

A work in progress. Alaric knew that the Trail Killer was tempted, just just like he was, the serial killer was showing restraint out of caution. No doubt the curfew intimidated him.

"Ah, so while the curfew is in effect, the Trail Killer will stay dormant?" Augustus nodded in understanding. "That's a relief. I'm glad we don't have to worry about any more stabbings in the meantime. Although, I have to wonder, why doesn't the Trail Killer use a gun?"

"If he wanted quantity, he'd be going about his method with more efficiency. A gun would allow for a higher number of fatalities but to *him*, a gun is unnecessary and could even hinder his current

method. Having used his knife for the first murder, the Trail Killer is now attached to it and the knife is a part of his ritual and murder, to him, wouldn't be complete or *fulfilling* without it."

The Trail Killer took pride in being an enigma. In communicating absolutely nothing with the police and got off them being left to guess... Alaric knew it would bother the serial killer that they knew so much despite the killer's efforts at maintaining a distance.

That brought him a small and temporary satisfaction.

"Right," Augustus nodded, eyes darting to the side as he recalled the next line of the script. "And what were you able to tell from the Trail Killer's victims?"

"The earliest were the most telling," Alaric stated. "Kirkland was a classic case of overkill. To simplify overkill, it's defined as murder with excess aggression unnecessary to complete the murder, indicating the murder was emotionally driven and likely the Trail Killer's first. The day that the Trail Killer encountered Kirkland in the park, the Trail Killer was troubled or frustrated with personal problems that made him lash out at the first person he saw who invoked his wrath, if only by a perceived slight."

It was equally as likely that the Trail Killer personally knew Arthur, but considering how it was evident Arthur went to the park alone of his own accord, more signs point to it being *opportunistic*.

Besides, *semantics* weren't the goal of bringing up Kirkland.

Once the interview was released, Alaric ordered the press to leak Kirkland's final resting place. This was a necessary sacrifice and if it made the Trail Killer *nostalgic*...

It was a desperate idea, but Alaric would stop at nothing to exhaust all measures possible.

He continued with a brief analysis of the deaths before describing exactly who the Trail Killer was. Though he found himself keeping it brief when he recounted the third death and it didn't slip his notice when Augustus' facade slipped and temporarily broke the character of confidence he had become.

It left Alaric with a feeling he'd rather not analyse so instead, he powered forward onto the next phase.

"We're looking for someone who's certainly socially isolated, someone who thinks they're getting back at their slights, real or *imagined*. This person is deeply wounded and internalised a monumental amount of resentment they cannot express in their daily life," Alaric spoke condemningly. "There is no specific target victim. Shock, fear and notoriety is his goal."

But one day that may not be enough...

Alaric needed to catch the Trail Killer before that day came, find a *solution* before the curfew wasn't *enough*. He loathed to think how the Trail Killer could possibly escalate further. What would happen if he got *bored*.

No doubt the Trail Killer was already fantasizing about something bigger. No doubt already spending all day dreaming about it. The last thing Alaric needed was for the Trail Killer to make a reappearance now.

"I *cannot* stress enough that compliance with the curfew is *mandatory* and those who break it *will* face the maximum penalty-" Alaric spoke with deadly intensity as he projected all of his authority into the camera. He couldn't reveal the stakes just yet, but he needed the public to know that this was no drill and lives were in danger if the public didn't *comply*.

Eventually, after more strategic questions, the interview finally ended. With a deep sigh, Alaric felt his posture fail as he brought a hand to his face. He hoped the weight under his eyes didn't look as severe as it felt, but he resolved to forget about that and focus on what was important.

"My editors will have this all wrapped up before the evening news," Augustus cleared his throat, his voice losing all exaggerated personality as he became serious. "We'll make sure to let you see the preview before anything goes on air."

Alaric gave a nod of acknowledgement as he fixed his posture, withholding a wince as his back tensed. Now he had to usher out Augustus before the man *inevitably* started to talk and bring up the one thing Alaric wouldn't linger on.

"So how have you been?" Augustus' tone almost gave Alaric whiplash as the other lay the friendliness on *thick*. "I hope Gilbert's doing alright, just the other day Feliciano-"

"I would like to keep our relationship strictly professional, so please refrain from discussing irrelevant matters." Alaric dictated, already blocking out the other's voice.

"Right, of course," Augustus said, voice strained as he kept lingering and Alaric knew he wanted more. "So... are we going to run a story on what happened or are you going to go with a blackout?"

Alaric sighed deeply as his thoughts were once again jerked in yet another direction. Last night.

He was a hypocrite for having confided that sensitive information to Augustus, but Alaric didn't know what he was thinking when he did. But it was too late now, and a second opinion at the time had relieved him of a fraction of stress temporarily...

But now the weight of the task ahead of him weighed down on his shoulders and Alaric sincerely felt no relief at the interview being complete. One task to free space on his plate for a new one... It felt like there was an overwhelming amount of noise running through his head and to reach a solid conclusion for anything, he had to sift through thick mud to get anywhere.

One thing at a time. He couldn't afford to slip up. And when he couldn't see what the 'right choice' was... no, tonight was too soon to tell. With the recent development, the police force had their attention split from the Trail Killer and had been working tirelessly to reach an understanding of *just* what they were up against now.

So by tomorrow, Alaric would have more information and could make a measured and educated decision. Until then, he felt far too uneasy showing his hand.

"I don't know. I need to consider it and the implications," He said shortly as he stood, ignoring his aching body as he returned to his desk. "It wouldn't be wise to overwhelm the public at once."

He'd just focus on releasing one development at a time. Until then, he would work tirelessly behind the scenes to cover as much ground as he could.

That gave him an idea an he picked up his pen yet again. He could still see Augustus lingering but Alaric ignored him, hoping the man would take the hint and let the Chief work.

Alaric wrote himself a note to revise the Trail Killer's profile to the press another day, urging the public to call in if they knew someone who fit the description. Of course, the Trail Killer would never all in... but there would be those who called in just to chase the attention. Each and every one of them would need to be investigated, and there was the chance that someone actually recognised someone was the Trail Killer.

It wouldn't hurt to try, as hopeless as the odds against him seemed.

Two detestable birds that needed to be eradicated, one stone.

Augustus did take the hint because Alaric didn't realise the crew had left at all until he looked up and found his office empty...

Alaric held his head in his hands as he breathed deeply and willed his eyes not to close. He needed to keep moving, even if he did feel like a car stretching gas a little too thin.

And because he could never have a moment to himself, his phone sounded with a notification and he pulled it from his pocket, ignoring the sense of *dread* that came with the sound. That a feeling that had been completely foreign to him until...

He had turned it on silent during the interview so it didn't surprise him at all when he saw over thirty new notifications. The pang of dread quickly deepened into annoyance when he saw four of those notifications being messages from Gilbert. Alaric read through them with an increasingly tense gaze as his disapproval grew.

A wave of heat flushed through him and his teeth ached as his jaw grinded down to nothing.

His grandson never took anything seriously. All Gilbert had contacted him for was to beg his grandfather to *divulge* him about the events that had transpired last night, using guilt to push for the Chief to personally clear up the rumours for what could only be *entertainment*.

How *dare* Gilbert try and leverage hs grandfather's position for his benefit. Gilbert was out of line and before Alaric knew what he was doing, the phone was ringing.

When Gilbert picked up, Alaric didn't allow him to speak.

"Refrain from overstepping, Gilbert. I do not appreciate it as my time is better spent on things that matter. I expect respect from you and I expect you to know your place and *not* pry for invasive details that do not concern you. Think twice before contacting me about trivial matters again."

Gilbert made some fractured noises as if he were attempting to speak but couldn't. Alaric didn't care to hear it, not when there were more important things to do.

But when Alaric hung up, the frustration he felt wasn't alleviated at all as something worse sunk in his stomach.

He ignored it.

There was work to do. Too much work to do and he loathed that he now had to review the interview footage before it aired, forcing more important things aside on his plate. Though it left

him with a deep feeling of regret because the one person he'd trust to review the footage for him...

Had been murdered.

And nothing he could do could fix that. Alaric was used to have problems with solutions. This was one thing that couldn't be fixed and it ate at him.

He put his phone back down and turned his attention towards something that mattered. He couldn't afford a distraction on something he already knew should be put behind him.

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Despite being unable to keep his eyes open for long and leaning far too heavily on his desk, Alaric hadn't realized how much time had passed until his phone rang.

The sound was abrupt and pervasive, making Alaric's heart tense and girt his teeth in annoyance and dread for the knee-jerk reaction by the simple ringtone.

It was far past the evening 6 o'clock news and well into curfew, now he was nearing twenty-four consecutive hours without sleep. That didn't bode well, and neither did the caller ID. Alaric had a sinking feeling he knew the nature of the call as he immediately picked up what would no doubt be urgent news *at best*.

...

He was naive to think it was anything other than the worst-case scenario. Alaric carefully placed the pen down on the desk, as he processed the new development.

Somehow, he felt like he was hearing it from a distance and wasn't feeling what he should despite the clarity of the situation. All he could do was think about the facts because he couldn't comprehend anything else.

Alaric should've known last night was not an isolated incident. Or the strange events of the few nights prior.

And now he's made the wrong choice.

Objectively, this was all his fault. What happened was again because of a choice he made-

Aggressive apathy consumed him as he pushed down irrelevant feelings. He lowered the phone, feeling as though his own movements were being puppeted like a marionette. Eyes stared forward as he replayed what he heard, somehow unbelieving yet completely grounded and only concerned about the logistics.

He had just lost another grandson. The city had gained a new threat. He needed to escalate and gain control.

Alaric didn't know how to handle this. Ludwig would, but he wasn't here.

He knew he couldn't announce this to the public. But he couldn't get away with not doing it. But he didn't even know how to broach it. He needed more time, another thing that would never be granted to him.

What he did know was the FBI *didn't* negotiate with *terrorists*. The only silver lining Alaric could see what the threat *wanted*, and he knew he'd have to withhold it by all means necessary. The police force could *not* be bargained with and wouldn't fold for *anything*.

What he did know was that there would be no publicity on his grandson's murderer... because evidentially, exposure could become inspiration.

He should've never tolerated the use of a moniker. Not when he knew the risks.

Chapter End Notes

Criminal minds actually inspired this chapter! I was watching an episode and thought that it was really similar to this story in application and thought why not. So I referenced it a little as some profile elements matched up

The episode was season 5 episode 15; public enemy. The episode is about an indescriminate slasher who targets public places due to hatred for the world. Interesting...

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Hope this clears things up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The interview was definitely *interesting*. Matthew almost found it amusing how obvious the Chief's mind games were, even more amusing that the general public would be oblivious.

So what if he was a former federal agent? The only threat would be his previous connections, which Matthew wasn't worried about *at all*... the Trail Killer had connections too.

If only the Police Chief knew his own grandson was supplying the enemy...

Though Matthew did consider he may have been a little hasty in killing Ludwig... because Gilbert got a whole lot more information out of *him* than his grandfather... but Matthew would make do.

The Chief brought up the memorial, no doubt to remind the Trail Killer to go. But Matthew knew they wouldn't be able to pick him out in a crowd of what had to be *thousands*... and if he never turned up again to revisit the memorial, then the police would only get more frustrated.

(Plus they'd never be able to cross reference a handwritten name from the funeral, as he had never written one down.)

As nice as it would be to sit in front of the memorial... all alone with just his vindication and thoughts, Matthew had bigger and better things to look forward to.

He was a little surprised that the Chief had acknowledged so much of the profile. Though it was a welcomed surprise after seeing the draft while Ludwig was still alive. It was amusing the police really believed he had such little self-control... or maybe it was to bait him into proving them right... Matthew didn't know, but what he *did* know was that he'd be steering clear of anywhere that would be of interest to police. He could see from the look in the Chief's eye that the man would do *anything*.

And as annoyed as Matthew was for their accurate assessment of his mistreatment *after* it was too late, he wasn't worried at all about being identified from it. No one had *ever* sympathised with his problems, somehow assuming he had *none* and was perfectly content being a doormat, so no one would realise he felt *suffocated* enough to become a monster. No one would dob him in... his facade was far too thick for anyone to see through and no one would ever put themselves in his shoes to realise that it was a facade at all.

Though he wouldn't go as far as to call himself a *psychopath* or *sociopath*, as the Chief bluntly put it. If anything, Matthew had a little *too* much empathy and patience that his goodwill was abused until it ran completely dry.

That said, the Chief was right in his assessment of the Trail Killer's victims. Matthew had been intrigued by the parroting of his inner monologue and amused as when Alfred watched the interview, he leaned far forward on the couch it looked like he would fall off.

What *did* surprise Matthew was seeing Feliciano's grandfather as the interviewer. Matthew didn't know that Augustus would be involved, but found it interesting...

It really was a small world.

It left him wondering how Feliciano reacted... *if* he watched the interview or even knew what his grandfather was up to... or if everyone was still violently babying him to the point of oblivion. Though *Alfred* didn't seem surprised to see the man, which left Matthew slightly annoyed at being out of the loop, even about something that could be brought up in trivial small talk.

When Matthew lay in bed that night, nothing weighed on him as he indulged his violent fantasies. He couldn't help but think of all the others he could add to his kill list once vacancies opened up, all the people he could 'coincidentally' cross paths with and lure into the park.

If someone knew him... or *thought* they knew him, it wouldn't be hard to get them to follow him. If there's a will, there's a way, and Matthew was certain in his ability to get *anyone* he could want alone with him...

Improvisation was a long mastered skill.

He was getting ahead of himself, but maybe it didn't matter. As he lay in his comfortable bed, alone in the silent house, he couldn't help but dream...

...
Matthew was standing in his personal graveyard. Birds flew overhead, their calls echoing through the deep forest.

The only other sound was harsh breathing from his panicked companion.

Wide red eyes stared, mouth parted in pure horror at the scene ahead. Matthew watched, his own mouth turned up and eyes narrowed to focus on Gilbert as things clicked in place.

"I'm the Trail Killer," Matthew pulled the leash taunt, wrapping it around his hands securely. "I killed your best friend and he deserved it."

Gilbert couldn't take his eyes off the scene in front of him but couldn't take his eyes off Matthew either. His eyes darted around just as rapidly as his breathing.

"I killed your brother too."

Gilbert let out a shuddering breath as he staggered backwards.

Somehow the albino didn't register the current threat either. No one ever did. Matthew moved quickly, wrapping the leash around Gilbert's neck from the front and pulling as he looked his former bully right in the eye.

"It was almost too easy, eh?"

The leash was taunt and Gilbert thrashed as he clawed at it. Matthew didn't leave any room for error, didn't give Gilbert a single inch of leeway. He grinned, wide and feral as Gilbert choked. His albino skin changed shades as he was strangled and Matthew couldn't help but find his pale skin pretty as he turned whiter than Matthew could ever imagine. Matthew told him as such and as the words registered, Gilbert choked out noises of humiliation, broken by the tension restricting his voice box and making the sounds all the more unrecognisable and pathetic.

More than his face draining of colour, his eyes bulged as tears poured out uncontrollably, staining his porcelain-like cheeks... now a bright shade of purple.

Tears stained his face long after his eyes went dull. Matthew loosened the leash and Gilbert collapsed to the ground.

He would be missing for some time... Gilbert wouldn't be found until the Trail Killer was ready to reveal his collection of cold bodies.

And when the graveyard was revealed... the chief would be called to personally see the tragedy...

His grandson's corpse would be on full display, just for him...

Maybe that's when the Trail Killer would reveal his graveyard... once he got through his personal list... with Gilbert as the grand finale.

That was an inspiring idea.

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Matthew jerked awake once he heard a noise. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, but then he realised it was just the front door and his inconsiderate brother was home. Matthew was so groggy that he couldn't even be annoyed at Alfred, instead just rolling over and pressing his face into his pillow.

But as he slowly got more of his bearings, he realised that it was hours before dawn... his eyelids were almost too heavy to lift but the room was darker than it should be and as he strained to listen, something didn't sound right.

No, something was *wrong*. The house was *cold*...

Eerie.

He didn't think twice about investigating. Muscle memory moved him from his bed to cracking open his door, all without making a single sound. He held his breath as he poked his head out into the dark house and listened.

As his eyes adjusted, Matthew took in the sights to match the sounds that he was hearing.

There was a lump on the ground, half curled up and *shivering*. Alfred's arms were around his legs, his hands were tense and his fingers were trembling as they dug into his knees. His breathing was sharp and shallow and Matthew couldn't help but stare as he tried to comprehend what he was looking at. Only a moment later he figured that he needed to act, but that feeling was met with the realization that Alfred hadn't noticed him... at all.

Certainly not a foreign feeling...

But it felt disturbing this time.

Matthew glanced around. Alfred left the door wide open, the only light coming from the street casting long shadows into their house. Clearly, *something* had happened and Matthew wanted to know what. *Needed* to know. This wasn't like the night before at all.

He moved to kneel in front of Alfred, noticing the sheen of sweat covering his face as his unfocused eyes passed right through him. Matthew couldn't keep the calculated look from his gaze as he willed his face to be malleable and *perform*.

"Alfred... are you okay?" Matthew spoke clearly, words pronounced slowly. "Why are you on the floor? Did something happen?"

No doubt something happened... but he really needed to get his brother talking again. That was something his brother was *usually* really good at, unless he was determined to ice Matthew out...

Alfred didn't respond, his breath ragged.

Matthew glanced over his brother, feeling a strange feeling shoot through him.

"You're not hurt... are you?"

It didn't look like it. Something happened, but not *to* Alfred.

Would one of his friends being arrested shake him up like this? Alfred definitely saw *something* and not knowing made Matthew shift uneasily.

"Alfred..." Matthew hesitantly reached to shake his brother. At the brief touch, Alfred's eyes widened as he took in his surroundings and his breath hitched and stopped. Completely frozen. His arms went rigid and his mouth snapped shut.

Matthew pulled his hand back, but Alfred kept holding his breath and staying perfectly still.

"Alfred.. it's okay," Matthew made his voice as comforting as possible, but Alfred still didn't seem to realise Matthew was kneeling right in front of him.

At Matthew's words, Alfred stared him right in the eyes and Matthew couldn't help the shiver that tore through him. Something wasn't right, and the way his own brother was looking at him caused him to think of the way some of his victims had stared at him.

Matthew lost his balance and stumbled backwards.

Matthew was torn between thinking about what could've happened and what the right course of action was to fix Alfred. He settled for letting his body run on autopilot as his mind raced. He stood to get a glass of water and being *useful* while going over all the things that could've made Alfred this way.

Maybe his brother *thought* he had a close encounter with the Trail Killer and realised he couldn't act, freezing up and damaging his self-image so much that he was reduced to such a state? Alfred always wanted to be the hero so being unable to act would hurt him so bad...

Matthew knelt in front of Alfred again, who hadn't made an effort to move off the floor, only going as far as to prop himself up on his elbows... and was somehow oblivious to the stickiness on his

own face. Even in the low light, Matthew could see the shine of tear tracks running down his brother's face as his breath kept hitching. At least he was breathing again and no longer corpse rigid.

Matthew saw and registered the tears but didn't linger on the cold feeling inside him.

Alfred seemed to have once again forgotten where he was and that he wasn't alone, his eyes staring into the floor with lost intensity as his face kept morphing into expressions as if he were acting through something. All while absentmindedly reaching for his head as he braced himself on the floor. Matthew could feel his own jaw tense as he watched.

He knew his brother was suffering from his own demons... maybe today was just a bad day for him? After all, a lot of people Alfred cared for had died... and Antonio had made references to Alfred understanding the way he felt.

Matthew tried offering him the glass, calling his name until Alfred's eyes landed on it. His brother took it, though Matthew wasn't sure his twin knew who was offering it to him. With a shaking hand, Alfred drank it and Matthew tried not to fidget as he waited.

Maybe Gilbert did something stupid and hurt himself in the pursuit of desperation? Alfred would definitely blame himself for that since he wasn't able to stop his friend.

No, that look that Alfred gave him... it kept plaguing his mind. It *meant* something.

Alfred finished the water in one go, panting as he lowered the glass. He was still pale but he seemed a little sharper than before and Matthew reached to take the glass and his brother's attention.

"Alfred... are you okay?"

Or maybe this had been stewing since the interview. It wasn't just a throwback for Matthew, Alfred could've been affected when the Chief brought up Arthur... If Alfred hadn't been completely healed and only putting up a facade, maybe that affected him deeply...?

Did Alfred visit Arthur's grave?! Matthew would've thought Alfred knew better... but he also knew his brother was stretched thin and desperate and thinking wasn't his strong suit.

Maybe he had a close call with the police at the gravesite and that was the reason for the look. Maybe Alfred was accused of being the very thing he *hated* and sought to end.

"Alfred where did you go?" Matthew pressed, hand tight on the glass. He felt a little detached from the situation and made himself perform while slipping into the role quite comfortably. But he found he couldn't linger on it, not when he was so consumed with finding out what the hell was going on.

"Alfred," Matthew put a hand on his brother's shoulder and gave a shake, eliciting a strange noise from him that was between a garbled gasp and groan.

"Uh, what?" Alfred forced out but his eyes were glancing away, obvious that his thoughts were racing somewhere else.

"What happened?" Matthew stressed.

"I- uh..." Alfred jerked involuntarily and breathed in sharply through his teeth. "He- Oh fuck, I knew it-"

"Knew what?" Matthew stressed. Knew that playing vigilante was an impossible idea? "*Alfred*?"

"I fucking knew it," Alfred's voice broke and his breath hitched dangerously. "I knew it, I fucking knew it-"

Matthew kept questioning, prodding and trying to hide his frustration as Alfred started to spiral, his breathing getting out of control as suddenly he became *too* talkative and started repeating things to himself. Occasionally he'd bark out a laugh with a shaky voice but he didn't sound amused, not when the tone almost seemed panicked and disbelieving.

"Oh my God, another one, *another one*! Why the *fuck* not! Why the fuck not! *Another one*, oh my God why does it have to be *like this*?! I have to be dreaming-" Alfred's tone changed to one of certainly as he nodded, pulling up his sleeve and bringing his hand to his mouth. Matthew just watched as Alfred sunk his teeth into his own flesh before breaking out in laughter as more tears came.

Along with a thin trickle of blood onto the floor, but Alfred didn't even seem to notice.

"Well *FUCK*." Alfred's voice was watery and pathetic as he swallowed hard. "It's real. It's really real. Of *fucking course it's real* because fuck me, *fuck* literally everyone whythefuckisit*likethis?* OH MY GOD, *FUCK*-"

Matthew couldn't get through to Alfred, not with words or gentle shaking and he was hesitant to actually slap his brother across the face or something else extreme. He sat back and watched, feeling both bizarre and genuinely disturbed.

Alfred fisted his hands into his hair as he continued to scream out profanities and writhe in place.

Something happened, that much is obvious. But to have caused a reaction like this...

It didn't bode well.

And it made Matthew really nervous to not even be able to anticipate *what*.

Alfred kept ranting, making Matthew freeze up when he suddenly jumped from the floor and started pacing erratically as he continued to trip over his words as he talked to himself and threw his hands around with severe incoordination one would only describe as fanatic. Matthew once again tried to butt in and couldn't help but feel sour when once again, he was completely ignored.

As fucking always.

Once that feeling started it didn't stop. Matthew could feel himself grow colder as Alfred continued to freak and ice Matthew out, apparently content with talking to himself. As much as Matthew wanted to know what the hell was going on, he suddenly couldn't care less to *chase* and *beg* like he had been doing all his life.

So instead he grit his teeth and watched Alfred with narrowed eyes, hoping he to piece something together from the context.

But all Alfred did was go on and on about what he should do now, apparently unable to come to a conclusion or find resolution for his situation... whatever that would be. Then he'd bark a laugh, tell himself everything's fine and everything would turn out alright, then he'd repeat himself from the top as he argued with himself.

Matthew doubted that even Alfred knew what he was saying. His words scrambled and face briefly contorted in confusion.

Alfred kept running his hands through his hair and tilting his head in consideration for whatever he was *thinking* in response to his spoken words and questions and Matthew felt even more frustrated at being forced to endure a one-sided conversation.

But that frustration quickly because ire when suddenly Alfred froze, his arms dropping completely and the only warning Matthew got that Alfred had figured something out was his brother nodding sharply before bolting out the front door. The house immediately became quiet again and Matthew huffed in annoyance as he glanced at the still open front door and out onto the dark streets.

Something was stirring inside him and he let his face harden.

That really made him want to get back at Alfred and lash out in some way. Matthew just dug his nails into the inside of his palm as he considered what to do before choosing to push it aside.

Revenge wasn't important, finding out what happened *was*. And as much as he hated waiting... he took a moment to go through his own debate before settling on leaving things for the morning was his best bet. There wasn't anything he could do now but fester.

Matthew forced himself to his feet and closed the front door, pushing it sut and feeling like he was puppeting himself with strings to make him move as his mind replayed what he just witnessed, over and over again as if to break it down.

That *look* on Alfred's face... Matthew couldn't decipher it at all and it plagued him.

Why couldn't Alfred just *talk* to him??

Matthew was sitting on the edge of his bed, suddenly realizing he had walked to his room with no memory of it. Maybe that's what happened to Alfred? He had so much on his mind and it caused him to blank?

Matthew knew that he should try to sleep so he could be at his best for whatever was thrown at him tomorrow, but as he lay down and closed his eyes, the thoughts didn't stop. And neither did the feeling that he was being shut out, *again*.

Because he was *Matthew*, and who actually gave a shit about *Matthew*?

Not Alfred *apparently*, who had always been too cool for his own twin.

It wasn't just *Alfred*, *everyone* left Matthew out and Matthew was left in anxious anticipation that life was going on without him-

Matthew knew he was having a moment but he couldn't stop it from coming. He tangled his fingers in his hair and pulled as he grit his teeth, making his jaw ache. He didn't even know *what* he was feeling, only that it was unwelcome and *pervasive*.

And that it hurt. It always hurt. It surprised him because he thought there was nothing left to hurt. After all, it had been so long since he'd felt so *severe*.

As a child he was told to pour his heart into everything he did. So he did, because how could he refuse an order expected of him? He poured and poured... and now he was nothing but empty with no hope of replenishing.

Yet he was stupid. Every time Matthew told himself he was done, he realised he never meant it. Yet he still continued to invest, if only out of habit more than actual hope for reciprocation. He no longer cared for the gamble of the outcome, just that this moment passed and once the obligation was gone he'd be free.

He was a slave... and everyone saw him for what he was.

Matthew kept pulling at his hair as he tucked his legs in and leaned against the wall of his painfully silent bedroom. The silence pounded in his ears. His head hurt but his fingers were too taunt to relax and he was too consumed with something *disgusting* worming around in his very soul.

He was still pouring everything he had, but now it was all into the Trail Killer's legacy...

Where would it end? Would his arms get sore from pouring his own cup too?

It felt like he was waiting. Like he was sitting in storage.

He knew he was just having a moment but it still felt like he had walked to the end of his path and was staring at a brick wall, listening to the sounds of others *living* on the other side. He couldn't see them or ever reach them. Even if he did the best with what he had...

There was no going forward for him.

He had accepted it already, but it still made him sad. He felt a little annoyed because he thought he was over feeling sad. He knew he was just having a moment. *It wasn't fair*. Why couldn't time just stop for a while so he could catch his breath and catch up?

Matthew pulled his hands from his hair. He was being overdramatic and he knew it. He reached for his pillow to hug it as he considered if he was really being overdramatic or if he had just been trained like a dog to never have emotions. To always be happy and content and never have to be maintained. To be *easy* in exchange for praise.

Because everyone knew how hard Alfred was for his range of emotions... but he was loved despite them...

It wasn't fair. It never was.

Matthew felt like he should cry. Shouldn't he be crying? Thought it seemed that even his tear ducts were empty. Another thing that was already depleted, but at least it was something depleted for himself.

So he just sat there until he figured he should sleep and lay down feeling the same conflicting nothingness as before.

Yet the mounting pressure was more suffocating than ever before. He was supposed to be the enigma of this city... yet he knew less than those he was toying with.

Chapter End Notes

This didn't clear up anything, did it? Oh well >:)

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

> Holy shit check out the word count! I don't know if I should be proud or scared! I definitely hope this fic is less than 200k, I expect t wont exceed that number at most.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was quiet. *Deathly foreboding*. Like the world had actually been paused and the other shoe was just waiting to drop.

When he woke Matthew felt tired from his disrupted sleep but it wasn't anything that coffee couldn't fix, though he doubted it would fix the deep feeling of *inadequacy* that permeated his being. The feeling of just being out of place in his own life was overwhelming and it made Matthew itch to either do something and gain *some* control over everything slipping through his fingers.

Something like killing Mathias... strangling someone who *deserved* it.

He made himself coffee, wondering when Alfred got back because Matthew didn't hear him and after the state Alfred was in last night, doubted he had the consideration to sneak back in. He gave into the gnawing feeling inside him and went to check Alfred's room-

His brother wasn't home.

The rubber band inside him wound tighter.

But it was early... so Alfred could get home any moment. Matthew had routinely been getting up early since he started actually sleeping at night. He tried to keep his thoughts focused on the present as he paced back to the coffee machine to run it again, making another coffee for Alfred whenever he stumbled home. If Matthew intercepted him *before* he locked himself in his room, Alfred might stay awake longer and give Matthew *any* clue about what happened last night.

Did anything even happen? Matthew's mind was racing because of Alfred's demeanour and yet there was a possibility that his brother's perception was uninformed and was completely uncalled for.

Matthew sat on the couch, turning on the TV as he browsed the same forums he'd always scroll when he wanted insight or information. He sipped on his coffee until it was gone and had to push Alfred's out of reach so he wouldn't consume that too.

The TV had nothing... a stark absence of news and Matthew had a feeling that the Chief was pulling strings to keep things silent... it made him nervous to speculate *why*.

Luckily the internet was not so quiet. There were rumours online like the night before, of police concentrated in one area and of blocks being inaccessible and surveyed by police...

But Matthew doubted that it was another attempt of luring the Trail Killer like the night before that got Alfred so worked up-

Unless the police took it *too far* to lure the Trail Killer by doing something *completely* inappropriate... not that he could even picture *what*, besides the police staging a crime to claim was the Trail Killer to try and fuck with Matthew's mind and bait him into reacting?

Possibly... since the Chief would stop at nothing in the pursuit of justice... no matter his methods...

Apparently, there was still no reception in that suburb now, apparently due to emergency maintenance...

Multiple helicopters had been dispatched last night yet there was nothing on the news about it. That made Matthew pause as he thought about the possibility that the Chief was just trying to bait him... especially when the same area was popping up in all rumours and Matthew recognised it as where Roderich lived, having taken brief notes on both Ivan and Roderich when he took Alfred's phone.

He could plant the idea in Alfred's mind to utilize Gilbert's connection with Roderich to gain information that would benefit *everyone*, though he could imagine Gilbert's reluctance due to the nature and relationship of his cousin...

Matthew kept scrolling, oblivious to the time and Alfred's cooling coffee... obsession was the only thing on his mind... piecing together theories that were just as quickly discarded, leaving him no closer to the truth.

Until a warning for low percentage popped up on his phone and Matthew realised that *hours* had passed and he found himself back in the present. He put his phone down, mentally chiding himself for being so consumed by the discussions and fear online that he didn't even notice Alfred come back! Matthew tipped Alfred's wasted coffee down the sink and went to put his phone on charge when he noticed that Alfred's door was still open...

That made him pause as he stared into the room, *devoid* of Alfred with only his phone rhythmically lighting up eerily with every notification.

Alfred wasn't back?

That made him feel something jolt inside him, though he didn't know what. Matthew tried not to linger on it as he put his phone on charge. It wouldn't be weird if Alfred had never come home before... but because it had happened only *today*, right after that weird *incident* last night...

Matthew couldn't convince himself it *wasn't* connected.

Alfred's phone kept lighting up as he got notification after notification...

Where the *fuck was he*?

Sure, there was a possibility that Alfred had to hide like Ivan did... except there was a possibility that Alfred didn't hide well enough and was arrested-

A high possibility and Matthew wouldn't even know it either. If just like the moves Alfred only got *one* phone call upon arrest, it wouldn't be to *Matthew*.

He'd have to figure out a way to find out through Alfred's friends if he was arrested. At least having Alfred's phone gave in an advantage and Gilbert was the first contact that came to mind...

Matthew went to check Alfred's phone and read through his notifications when the front door opened and interrupted him.

How anticlimactic. Matthew sighed as the tension inside him ebbed. Why was he assuming the worst when Alfred was probably *fine* and had likely just caught up with one of his other stupid friends and lost track of time as they discussed... whatever the hell happened last night-

"Oi, Jonesie, where are ya cunt?"

Matthew's brain short-circuited as he jumped to stick his head into the hallway-

Steve and Zach were coming through the front door, bags holstered over their shoulders and *definitely* no Alfred.

So, it seemed that *today* was the day they were having their sleepover and Alfred had just *neglected* to mention that. Matthew couldn't be annoyed, yet his frustration was bone-deep and he *really* wanted to do something to get back at Alfred.

No. He *was* annoyed. He couldn't deny it, despite his knee-jerk reaction to always assume he was *fine*. He was fucking *fueled* with anger and it made him feel *sick* at just the idea of shoving it down and *swallowing* it.

He really, *really* wanted to do something to Alfred just to prove that Matthew wouldn't lay down and be a fucking *doormat*-

More than that, he just wished there was a way for him to just *fix* everything and know everything he needed to know! Despite all his manipulations, he could never close the gap between him and everyone else who was *normal* and just *were*.

"I guess he's still sleeping," Zach shrugged, oblivious to Matthew lurking. "That's Al for you."

"Old mate can sleep through just about anything, it's kinda impressive though, *struth*," Steve chuckled as he took out his phone and only a second later Alfred's ringtone started blasting.

The sound only fueled Matthew's anger, the sound making the rubber band wind up tighter. Because *seriously*, *fuck you Alfred*! Matthew's lips sneered like he longed to actually say the words. His teeth ground together to remain silent as he hid from the guests and his mind ruminated on what he needed to do.

"That should wake him up," Steve chuckled. The ringtone kept ringing...

All he wanted to do was *hurt* Alfred and sudden fantasies of stabbing him flashed through his mind. Matthew's hands were *shaking* and he could seriously just *strangle* Al-

But Matthew knew he wouldn't act on fleeting fantasies. He didn't want to *hurt* hurt Alfred... he just didn't know how else to express his suffocating anger-

He just wanted to pick a fight. Matthew *needed* to spite him so he could flick away the feeling of weakness and prove that he didn't just *let* people push him around anymore-

"You think?" Zach replied. The ringtone kept ringing... Droning on and *aching*.

Matthew dug his nails into his palms, fist shaking as he hid in the doorway of Alfred's room and he mentally cursed his twin for *always* making his life *shit*. Last he knew, their cousins were staying for the day of the memorial... but if he had to take an educated guess, he'd assume that Alfred had offered they stay *until* the memorial.

The familiar feeling of *obligation* settled on his shoulders like radioactive dust. Thick, heavy, and *suffocating*, Matthew loathed how much was constantly expected of him and how he became buried by others.

But he couldn't see an out. He was hiding in Alfred's room and living on borrowed time.

It wasn't like he could tell them to *fuck off*. He only had one option.

"Wow he can really sleep through anything, ay?" Steve muttered with a chuckle.

"He's not actually here," Matthew stepped out, making the unexpected guests jump. "I don't know where he is. He might be shopping or something... he'll *probably* be back soon."

"Oh, righto. And he left his phone here?" Steve exchanged an amused look at Zach, who sent one back. No doubt silently making a joke about Alfred's dependence on that device... and now strange separation.

Matthew didn't disagree but he choked down his contempt for his exclusion. The rubber band was stretched past capacity yet Matthew was *barely* keeping it from snapping.

"It's alright, we'll make ourselves comfortable." Steve dropped a big shopping bag, presumably full of snacks onto the kitchen counter. Then he and Zach started unloading the bags onto the couch.

Alfred should be here, looking after *his* favourite cousins that *he* invited. Yet Matthew couldn't shake the feeling of obligation that he should be doing everything he could to make their cousins comfortable in apology for Alfred. And if he didn't do it, then Matthew would be *mean* and his cousins hadn't done anything to explicitly deserve Matthew not being *nice*.

He grit his teeth but tried to keep his smile stable. If he started letting himself be useful he could convince himself it was for himself because it was solely to alleviate his own feelings.

This was a severely uncomfortable situation. Matthew had other, *more* important things to be doing and yet *here he was*! But it would be rude to say he didn't want to be here. Even if he didn't want to -couldn't!- deal with this today! His schedule was demanding but once again, Alfred was pushing things onto his plate because he couldn't juggle his own shit.

Matthew felt like he could barely control his own feral state. How wasn't it obvious that his hateful aura was permeating everything around him? How couldn't anyone sense the poison in his eyes and the hostility in his act?

It was because no one was paying attention. No one ever did. That had to be it.

He silently set up sleeping arrangements in the living room, forcing his face to be placid and polite. He'd be able to slip away once Alfred came back but until then-

Zach struck up conversation with *him*. And Steve followed. Matthew's mind short-circuited when he realized that not ignoring him was an option for them.

Everything inside him was strained and yet- he would still invest. Now it seemed like he had no choice, but the rubber band loosened slightly, giving way to guilt.

The turmoil inside him had made him weak but he still felt like a monster for his completely *warranted* poison. Still, like the loyal dog he was trained to be, he found himself questioning if he may have been a little too hasty with his attitude today...

It was always *him* who second-guessed and dismissed himself. Matthew hated it. He hated *him* but more than that he hated the *everyone* who made him this way. He stiffled his train of thought.

Until he could do what he *wanted*, he'd have to *perform*. At least Alfred's absence could be a blessing now.

Because even if his cousins were talking to him out of boredom, or their own sense of obligation being guests... there was no Alfred to steal the spotlight and cast a shadow over him. He had never had time alone with his cousins before and while that thought left him bitter, he found that it wasn't so much of a drain to oblige them.

Because deep down, Matthew felt like he was making up for lost time...?

Or just the novelty of it actually happening, because better late than never. Such a pity it had to happen now, because to add to his frustration he couldn't enjoy it fully. He was too far gone to genuinely appreciate it and his mind wouldn't forget the more important things he had to take care of.

But if he had to be here and perform, he might as well enjoy the illusion of being included in the normality he always craved while it lasted. But his mouth was still bitter and dry.

"So, now we've got all that outta the way and we've set up, how about a cuppa before you give us a tour?" Steve beamed.

"A cup of what?" Matthew asked, biting back the sigh as he stepped into the kitchen with stiff limbs.

"Uhhhh," Steve ran a hand over his chin as he thought about it, as if it was a really hard decision to make. "Don't worry, I'll do it myself!"

Matthew blinked, freezing up when Steve started getting *into his space* while looking for supplies.

"Oh no, I can-" Matthew habitually protested and forced his locked up limbs to move. "You don't know where-"

"Nah mate it's fine, I won't mess up your kitchen," Steve shrugged as he started rifling through cabinets.

Matthew shrunk back to keep Steve out of his space, obeying the silent order to back off and momentarily annoyed at the intrusion before he realised... he was being relieved of a small duty that usually fell on him.

Maybe Matthew was just so used to living with Alfred and his *demands*... that it left him with a strange feeling as his bitterness drained from him when he realised that Steve wasn't expecting anything from him. Wasn't going to ask him impossible demands and ask Matthew to set himself on fire to warm him.

Something loosened inside him as Matthew stepped back, reclaiming his own space and he realised he felt... thankful. More than that, he felt something *crumble* and he could feel himself *breathe* in the presence of his cousins.

Yet he felt worse than ever before, once again feeling like the 'Matthew' he was expected to be, brushed aside and secondary.

He didn't want to be around people today... at least not people he didn't yearn to slaughter.

"Ight, found 'em," Steve looked through the cabinet with all the beverage options. "Of course, no Milo... so how about it Zee? Whatcha want?"

"Tea?"

"English breakfast... or some herbal shit?" Steve squinted at the label of the brightly coloured packaging. "Is that even a question? Gotta go with the safe option. Artie would be proud."

Steve grabbed the English breakfast tea and sat it on the bench before turning to Matthew.

"How about it? Whatcha drinking?"

Matthew's mouth parted as he quickly thought of a response to a question he didn't expect to be asked. Usually, when it came to a situation like this, he'd say 'the same'... but that was a *weak* answer and he *wasn't weak*.

Matthew was *not* going to pick the same because he wasn't scared to test them. Even if he was really testing himself. He had to have the guts to be *rude* for not being convenient.

"Herbal tea." Matthew bit his tongue to refrain from saying 'please'. It couldn't be rude to *not* say it when Alfred always got away with not using basic manners. After all, Matthew was just answering.

"Ight," Steve grabbed three mugs.

Matthew could feel himself retreating further into himself as he watched the bizarre scene unfold. It was foreign to him and he acknowledged that... yet he still felt a sense of indebtedness to Steve... and a guilt for not being *nicer*.

But Matthew knew that he shouldn't put Steve on a pedestal for something so small... but he still couldn't help but draw comparisons to Alfred.

Steve was just being *nice* because he was staying here, that was all. Though the whole incident made Matthew feel a little empty. Now part of him felt guilty about being angry and not wanting to look after his guests. Then he was filled with hatred again because he *knew* he owed them nothing and he *knew* that he was just fawning over scraps of care after being starved.

If only Alfred *hadn't* acted out, then Matthew wouldn't be so fucked up. Maybe he could socialise better and actually get something from it!

"Righto, tour time!" Steve put a mug in his hands, snapping Matthew from his thoughts.

Now Matthew was stuck with a herbal tea... something that wasn't his choice of drink and he knew he shouldn't waste. But he would at the soonest opportunity because he didn't have to be confined by *obligation* anymore. A small resistance and reclamation. To rebel against his *conditioning*. Maybe if he wasn't in an angsty mood he wouldn't be so aware of it, but it was a burden that suffocated him...

"Alright, eh, just follow me..."

A house tour wasn't exactly exciting so they only had themselves to blame when it was just a little underwhelming.

"And here's our bedrooms," Matthew gestured a hand.

"Hold up, don't tell us which is which," Steve announced. "You've gotta let us guess."

Matthew really didn't want to show off his bedroom or have anyone else inside of it, but he figured it was just easier to let them see it than try to think of an excuse to say no. His hand clenched around the mug, burning his skin as he mentally chided himself for slipping back into the familiar role of 'Matthew'.

Now he *needed* to say no- but it was too late.

"Alright, that's deffo Al's room," Steve said as he waltzed in. "It's just as cool as I remember it ay?"

Zach made a noise of agreement and Matthew's jaw tensed.

"Remember how we always thought his room was cool when we were kids? He had the best shit," Steve continued as he browsed the clutter in Alfred's room. Matthew didn't comment.

After a few more minutes of browsing, Matthew watched as his cousins went into his room and he hated himself more for not being able to speak up.

He couldn't find a reason to say no. But if he had one, he would've spoken up, would've asserted himself like a normal person even if he felt like an *asshole* for it.

"Well, this'll be a quick lookie," Steve glanced around.

"His room was always tidy," Zach added.

Matthew felt even more distant at the word 'tidy'. He was always expected to have a tidy room, meanwhile Alfred got praised so long as there was nothing on his floor...

It wasn't fair. Nothing had been fair from the start.

"Oi, what's this?" Steve said, approaching the hockey sticks hanging on Matthew's wall. "I forgot you guys were really into sports."

"I didn't forget. Remember how Al would always drag us to his footy games?" Zach retorted.

"Yeah I remember. Can't believe I forgot Matt played hockey. It was his whole thing for a good while," Steve turned to Matthew. "You were good at it too, right? Crickey, I can't remember if we

actually saw you play. You'll have to invite us along to your next game!"

"Sure." Matthew didn't care to keep this conversation going, he didn't care to correct, or argue, and he especially didn't care if it made him weak because his intentions were purely to end things instead of something pathetic like *sparing* his cousins the embarrassment of pointing out just how little they paid attention.

Obvious when there was a thick layer of dust coating the sticks...

At least after that interaction, he was bluntly reminded not to get invested. Matthew just knew not to exhaust himself to hold up the facade for those who didn't deserve it.

Which really was a pity, because he liked his cousins. Matthew always liked them and always wished they liked him too. But... he just liked the idea of them. The interactions he was having now... could be passed off as bonding. But even if he couldn't enjoy it now... he knew there was once a time he could've enjoyed this. Matthew really wished that things could've always been like this. But he knew better than to imagine how things could've differed.

Because even though this was nice, it wasn't nice *enough*. Even if Steve and Zach didn't demand he dance like a monkey and drain him dry, every second sentence had a pitfall that only hurt him.

Maybe he was just convincing himself that he was having fun. Because he should be. But he knew that what he was really feeling was simultaneous disappointment, along with consuming nothingness and emptiness.

In other words... no matter how much he acted, he didn't care. The persistent loneliness inside him would never budge and the unheard yearning that had been screaming inside him since he was a child had finally been silenced.

But it was okay. As soon as Alfred came back, Matthew would slip out all too easily and he would let himself be consumed by the only thing that mattered to him now.

Steve and Zach were still meandering about his room while Matthew retreated to the back of his mind but was snapped back to the present when Zach spoke.

"You know... I just realised what's missing. Remember that bear he always had?"

Someone had dumped cold water on Matthew and his stomach dropped.

"Oh yeah... shit, I remember that!" Steve laughed and glanced around the room, but was unable to see it. "He took that thing everywhere!"

Matthew wrapped his arms around himself as he was plunged underwater.

"That makes me miss my plush sheep," Zach sighed. "Why'd I leave him at home?"

He hadn't thought about *that* in a long time, but whenever he did it always ruined his day.

"Cus you're a big boy now Zee," Steve pat his brother's head. "But nah, what's the name of that polar bear he always had that Al-"

Why'd they have to go and bring up *Kuma*?!

The front door opened and there was a pause in the house. The door was closed with caution.

"Oi Jonesie is that you?" Steve spoke up with uninformed confidence. Zach's face portrayed the same eagerness.

Matthew dug his fingers in tight and all his anger towards Alfred dissipated- Only to come back with a wave of grief when he was reminded of Kuma-

But *that* was in the past and Matthew tried to shove it down and focus on the present. Alfred was *here* and wanted to see what he had to say for himself. If Matthew had any eagerness, it was morbid.

It took too long for Alfred to emerge from the hallway and step into the living room. He paused, leaning heavily on the wall as dead eyes registered the guests and the cogs started turning...

"Uhhh yeah," Alfred scrubbed a tired hand down his face. "Hi guys. Kinda forgot you were coming today otherwise I would've been here... uhhh."

Alfred trailed off as he shut his eyes particularly tight and Matthew just knew Alfred was trying to take the 'everything is fine' route. How original.

His jaw tensed as he watched Alfred mumble through fake explanations while trying to reel in just how exhausted he was.

Matthew couldn't stay another moment. He should've been honest with himself earlier that he had been suppressing his disgusting feelings. Watching Alfred be infuriating with his stubbornness was the final straw and Matthew didn't need to see it, not when he could already picture the routine. If Alfred was set on doing that, there was no getting answers and no point in prolonging exposure to the object of his frustration. He had other shit to do that he *actually* cared about. Alfred can reap what he fucking sowed and entertain his guests. Maybe then he'd have a glimpse into the burden Matthew had been carrying alone for so long.

Maybe it was karma for Kuma.

Doubtful.

While Steve and Zach ran over to Alfred to give greeting hugs, Matthew set his untouched herbal tea on the dresser of Alfred's room before slipping into his room to grab his backpack of supplies. He had one thing on his mind, and that was to *finally* get back on track with his own shit.

"So where've you been mate-?" Steve was cut off with an 'oof' sound, then his voice seemed strained "Oi, you're lucky I'm strong. Good luck trying to crush me... And don't tell me your plan to quit phone time before bed's failed. You look like shit."

"Uh yeah... my bad."

Everything was in his backpack so Matthew routinely slipped it on after a quick wardrobe change into his hunting outfit - plain clothes and no distinguishing features. A little obsessive and unnecessary but half the thrill was in getting away with his heinous crimes.

Matthew waited until Alfred and their cousins weren't in the hallway so he could slip by and was just about to slink out the front door when something Alfred said caught his interest.

"-turn on the TV cus I usually watch the news in the morning and- well let's just turn it on-"

Matthew stalked right back down the hallway and stuck his head around to watch the scene play out. Matthew knew something happened last night and he *knew* that Alfred was hoping to see it on the news, either because he knew the details... or he didn't.

The news was underwhelming until the reporter addressed the very topic the twins were hoping to hear about. The Reporter said the Chief says he has an update on the case and curfew and will present that in the evening, but until then he won't address the rumours. But the fact that it was less information than usual left Matthew with anticipation that Alfred's reaction to... *whatever* had been justified.

But Alfred didn't react like he did the night before. He didn't say anything or make any reaction at all. He was uncharacteristically quiet, even as Steve and Zach talked.

Then he turned the TV off, face and demeanour blank with a far away look in his eye.

Matthew didn't know why Steve and Zach didn't pick that up as odd. Alfred never had problems with background noise before.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I could've cooked harder with this, but this is just a stepping stone so Imma cross it and not look back. Exciting things on the horizon >:)

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew ripped the radio from its hiding place with more aggression than necessary... but he didn't care as he hastily turned it on and crouched to listen with bated breath. This was just one small pit stop before his real goal, but he just *had* to know, *had* to check if there was *anything* he could piece together.

...There was nothing on the radio besides the new status quo of bare minimum professionalism and he grit his teeth. The ache in his jaw was starting to strain too much.

So much for taking this radio... He didn't envision things playing out like *this* and what could've been his greatest advantage was completely useless!

Matthew let his face contort into a harsh frown. Nothing was going right today and he just sat there ruminating while the radio played.

Something happened last night and he only knew because of Alfred. If Alfred wasn't being his stupid self *trying* to be an illegal vigilante, then Matthew would be completely in the dark, *without* his guard up. What if it led to his downfall? No doubt the police knew what happened and Matthew entertained getting the answers from them... somehow.

But that wasn't the only thing he had to worry about. Now he had to juggle what was going on at home because Alfred didn't have either the consideration or foresight *or both* to tell Matthew about their cousins and he would *love* to see how Alfred was going to deal with that *now*!

The radio kept interrupting his thoughts as it periodically crackled to life.

It was *just* like the day before, hurried phrases, static sounds and the only thing an untrained ear could make out was the location and urgency.

Whatever happened... it was as severe as Alfred thought it was. There was a lot of police activity but to his frustration, he didn't know what to make of it. Matthew made a mental note to try and find a way to bring up Roderich to Alfred to pry for information, but he didn't like his chances when Alfred was...

Matthew just wanted *one* lead. But what Matthew wanted he couldn't get.

Fine, he'd move on to what he *could* do and chase after things he wanted.

Mathias. Matthew wanted him dead, *today*. He needed to wring someone's neck before he went back to *that house*. There was no way he could go back empty handed and *survive* if he didn't do *something* to take back control and contain himself.

Matthew turned off the radio and put it back as his mind still sought to figure out a way for him to get the information he *needed* and make sure that everything was *still okay* and he was still *safe*.

Maybe... well, he wasn't a coward. He could go to that area swarming with action. If he acted naturally, maybe he could pick up clues without drawing suspicion.

But what was he thinking? Matthew wanted to kill Mathias, these ideas plaguing his mind would only distract him! If he wanted information he would have to *somehow* go through Alfred and wring it from him. *Alfred* was the one with the connections, not Matthew!

And Matthew could feel bubbling resentment towards Alfred for that, for *everything*. He resented himself for not being as capable and having to rely on Alfred.

But it was for the best, wasn't it? It kept Matthew out of the spotlight...

Matthew let out a guttural sigh, feeling his fingers twitch as he stood. He wasn't used to feeling so much all at once. At least not anymore. For the past few ... well, since the Trail Killer was named, he had a sense of peace and a sense of purpose. He hated that it shook him now.

He just needed to find himself again.

Matthew knew he was stressed, he could feel the angry vibration of every suffocated cell in his body. His fingers yearned for his switchblade, tucked deep in his bag and when Matthew closed his eyes he could see himself tearing through flesh with ease and *relief*.

Matthew didn't want to think about himself now and how he wasn't '*fine*' just as expected to be, not when it made him feel impaired.

He squared his shoulders and started walking with purpose, eyes trained ahead with narrowed vision. It was time to make today Mathias' last day on this earth.

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At least one thing went right today. Matthew came across Mathias earlier than he expected to. Convenient, because he had been stewing on *how* to get his target from the house if he was home. But here he was, out in the open and *vulnerable*.

Matthew spied Mathias across the street, wrapped up in excessive winter clothes in the cooling weather as he stopped by a post office. Everything about him stood out, a testimony of his loud and obnoxious personality.

Matthew glanced around, finding the street moderately normal with mundane activity and no prying eyes before crossing the street. He lingered outside the range of the building's cameras as he thought about his approach.

He could 'run into' Mathias and by keeping the conversation on discussing the Trail Killer and connected events, Mathias would *definitely* become invested. Then Matthew could enthusiastically suggest they go see where *it all started*; where Arthur took his last breath.

Mathias' nature, the very thing Matthew hated, would be his downfall.

Matthew watched as Mathias walked further the other way, headed towards his house. Matthew spared him a glance before turning the other way to jog around the block and cut Mathias off ahead of his route home. It wouldn't do him any good to get caught on camera following someone right before they vanished. A disappearance like Mathias would *certainly* be noticed and with tensions as

high as they were in the city, he doubted the police would sweep it under the rug even if they couldn't prove it was connected to the serial killer activity.

Matthew wove through people as he jogged, posture relaxed to hide the urgency and his intentions from anyone who spared him a glance. But there was a resonating *thrill*, one that grew with each step and he couldn't deny he felt better already. He really missed the hunt and the game. Despite the risk and the stakes that wouldn't allow for failure, he knew he could pull it off. If only because he had the hunger to do so.

Once Matthew started talking to his target he couldn't *stop* until Mathias' heartbeat did. Now that it was within his reach, Matthew didn't realise how *starving* he was until he was *salivating*. It really had been *too long* since he killed someone who deserved it.

It brought him a sense of nostalgia.

Matthew rounded the corner of the block, slowed his jog to a casual stride before stopping completely as his chest seized.

Something was getting in his way, *again*.

He scrambled to hide around the corner while he calmed his breathing to a normal rhythm, internally cursing over and over until the words lost all meaning.

Mathias was talking Lukas' ear off, bouncing on the spot as his entire demeanour was the definition of sunny and the complete opposite of Matthew as he dug his nails into his palms.

Nothing was going right today. *Nothing*.

Matthew hadn't been seen, and some bitter part of him said he'd never been *seen* but he felt like tearing out his hair because *someone* was getting in his way.

But Matthew was stubborn. He couldn't leave if there was still a chance he would find an opening and *get* what he wanted... he come too far to stop now. Standing here with his target in sight. To walk away now...

Would be rolling over and giving up, which he couldn't do.

He pushed down his frustration and watched with focused eyes. Lukas came out of nowhere yet here he was, at the worst possible time. If Matthew wasn't annoyed at Lukas, he would've felt bad for him because he didn't look impressed at how obnoxious Mathias was.

Lukas tugged on Mathias' hoodie strings to demand his attention.

"Where did you go?" Lukas asked with exasperation as he cut Mathias off.

"Oh I just had to-" Mathias huffed and shrugged Lukas off. "*Errands*. I did say I had to walk off!"

The Chief said that the Trail Killer would move on if the conditions were right... and he was right. Matthew could feel the stress mounting, knowing that if he stayed too long or tried to force his desired outcome too much he'd only shoot himself in the foot and risk leading to his demise.

But Matthew didn't know that *yet*. If Lukas and Mathias went separate ways, The Trail Killer still had a chance.

"You could've told me," Lukas replied and Matthew could just tell from his body language and the way he tensed and shifted that he was troubled. Yet Mathias was oblivious.

"Aw come on, I'm a big boy. As if the Trail Killer would come and kill me next," Mathias laughed as he took off his gloves and shoved them in his pocket before flicking his hoodie down. "I'd know who he is if I saw him and he's not gonna get me in the middle of the day. You worry too much."

Lukas had a constipated look as he gave Mathias a lecture that was promptly laughed off.

Matthew had nothing against Lukas... but he didn't have anything against most of the others he killed... Lukas was still someone he knew. Because he could still get Mathias *today*... at the cost of taking Lukas down with him...

It wasn't exactly possible. Managing two victims without a loose end? *fuck*.

"Seriously, you worry way too much," Mathias gave Lukas a shake, earning an annoyed grunt and pinch. "*Ouch*! Come on, can't you worry about something else? Like where's Tino? Can't you go harass him for walking off?"

"I told him to go ahead so I could find you..."

"You could've texted me."

"It's serious..." Lukas seemed reluctant to speak.

"Really? What is it? What's wrong?" Finally, Mathias picked up on Lukas' demeanour and perked up more. "Did you see something on the news?"

"...a reporter leaked Arthur's grave."

Matthew blinked and strained to listen for more. Somehow, he wasn't even surprised and just *knew* the Chief was responsible for that.

"Really? Can you send me a link?" Mathias was taking his phone without hesitation when Lukas snapped.

"Mathias!"

Matthew was amused by just how thick Mathias really was. *Bitterly* amused because despite Mathias' inability to react appropriately, the friends he did have never left.

"Okay geez I'll find it later," Mathias chuckled apologetically as he put his phone away. "So...? Where's Tino now?"

"He went home..."

"Why?" Mathias had a look of genuine confusion on his face and Matthew didn't know how Lukas could tolerate how *unintelligent* the Dane really was.

Though it seemed this time Lukas couldn't actually tolerate it. He fisted a hand firmly in Mathias' shirt as his exasperation wore thin.

"Because it's *upsetting*. He's already stressed because Peter hasn't been doing well and we were supposed to be cheering him up today but *you* walked off-"

Wait... *Peter*?

"Okay, okay! I get it!" Mathias held his hands up. "I was gonna come back!

Matthew realized he had never actually been told what happened to Peter. Last he saw him was at Arthur's funeral... crying for his older brother.

But Matthew's vindication had quickly erased that memory and Matthew mentally slapped himself for losing track of that loose end. But he couldn't blame himself, not when he hadn't seen the boy since. He definitely wasn't at Ludwig's funeral... no doubt being sheltered from the mess that ruined his life.

Matthew realized he didn't know what happened to Peter after Arthur's death because he had been so caught up in his journey... but it wasn't hard to piece together.

He remembered seeing Berwald never leave Peter's side at Arthur's funeral and Tino hugged the crying boy. Since Lukas was describing Tino still 'stressing' for him now, Matthew could only assume that Tino took Peter in.

That did bring Matthew a slight sense of relief... or some other strange feeling he assumed was the case. He didn't know what love felt, only obligation. He knew what love looked like in every action he was expected to perform but never receive, and that feeling was always *burden*. But some feeling inside him led him to believe that he was glad that Peter was with people who cared about him.

But Matthew just *knew* Alfred would've known what happened to Peter but didn't care to tell him any of it. Matthew let the anger pass. He needed to stay focused on his goal.

"You get it?" Lukas crossed his arms challengingly. "Do you really get it?"

"Yes, I get it!" Mathias' voice rose. "Tino's all worried like he always is and don't get me wrong, I love Tino, but he'll be fine. Peter will be fine-!"

Lukas cut him off with a harder tone.

"I don't think you do get it. I'll just tell you so you don't say anything stupid in front of Tino and make him and Berwald more upset. Peter has been doing better and now Arthur's been brought up in mainstream discussion again. Do you understand that's his older brother? Just picture it if it were Emil and I. Imagine if *I* died, and *I* was your friend and then you had to take in *my* younger brother-"

"But you're not dead and you're not gonna die!" Mathias said, suddenly forceful and determined, making even Matthew's stomach flip. "Besides I do get it! I just like to look on the bright side of life!"

"Fine, stick your head in those clouds with silver linings but *don't* voice any of your thoughts," Lukas said warily. "Do you understand how much pressure Tino and Berwald are feeling? Tino has to break it to Peter that his big brother's grave is now public property and he can't visit whenever

he'd like without feeling like he has any privacy! How would you feel if your grave was made public to *everyone*"

Matthew knew he would be enduring a shitshow when he got home. Alfred was chronically online... there was no way he hadn't learnt about this. Matthew could only imagine just how insane Alfred would be acting with added stress lumped on his shoulders... or Alfred could just reject it altogether and keep acting like everything was fine.

But for how long?

"Well *I'd* find it pretty cool!" Mathias huffed. "It'd be like I'm famous and people would remember me-"

Lukas pinched Mathias again.

"*Don't* say that out loud."

"Okay, I won't! I get it! Really!" Mathias laughed it off before frowning. "But Tino doesn't need to be stressed because can't he just *not* tell Peter?"

Lukas gave Mathias a look of complete vexation.

"And how long can we keep it from him? Eventually, he's going to find out. Children aren't stupid Mathias, unlike *you*. He's going to notice and question or worse, find out he was never told. It's not an option!"

"Okay, okay, I'm just playing devil's advocate," Mathias winced in guilt, withering under Lukas' stare because he knew he was wrong. "Obviously Tino's gotta tell him and that really does suck but you can say what you want about my optimism but we know that Peter will be *fiiiine*. He's strong and he'll get over it again, he did the first time and he'll be back to being a joyful little boy in no time. Just hook him back up with that therapist and I'll buy him some lego or let him read all my viking books, that'll cheer him up!"

Matthew couldn't help but compare Antonio and Lukas as he watched poor Lukas do his best to wrangle everyone in his life and struggle with Mathias. Matthew really did feel sorry for him but he wondered why Lukas just didn't walk away.

Both figuratively and literally. Matthew would love for Lukas to hit Mathias one final time, harder than ever because *Mathias deserved it*, before storming off and leaving the Trail Killer with his opportunity. But he doubted that would happen, not when he saw some part of himself in Lukas' pitiful attempts at trying over and over to make Mathias something he *couldn't be*.

Thinking of it that way did make something in Matthew click, but he pushed it down.

Lukas muttered to himself in another language before sighing heavily.

"Sure, you can play the fun uncle when Peter needs a distraction and some cheering up. In fact, that's what we're going to do now. Tino and Berwald will talk about the best way to break it to him so how about we distract Peter."

That confirmed Matthew's nagging fear that he couldn't have Mathias ... *fuck*.

Unless, Matthew could loiter around Mathias all day long like he did when he stalked Kiku... but that was too high risk... Matthew dug his nails into his palms. If Peter benefited from Mathias being alive just a little bit longer... Matthew could hold off for one more day. Besides, surely there was something else he could do.

"Yeah can do!" Mathias flashed a bright smile. "I'll make sure Peter has the time of his life. Besides, it's not gonna be that bad. Arthur's grave will be a tourist location for maybe a week-month tops but then everyone will get bored and forget about him!"

Lukas grabbed Mathias' sleeve and began dragging him along with a conflicted face full of empathy, no doubt mourning for both Peter and Tino.

"That would be terrible..." Lukas grit out. "Considering that Arthur was the first victim, things might never die down and his grave will always be a tourist spot... which would definitely make it hard to shield Peter from being sucked in but if Arthur were to be completely forgotten..."

Something sat uncomfortably in Matthew's chest as he followed them to continue eavesdropping.

"But wouldn't that be better?" Mathias argued. "Because then he can go visit without being bombarded by fucked up tourists?"

"Either way... he's going to get hurt," Lukas said painfully. "Just... keep him happy until we have to break it to him."

"You gotcha!" Mathias slung an arm around Lukas, who still remained as tense as before.

"You're really sweaty, you know that?"

Mathias just laughed and pulled Lukas in further to the hug.

"You'd leave if you wanted to."

Lukas said nothing and Matthew kept following from a safe distance while thinking about what next.

"So what do you think's gonna be on the news tonight?" Mathias said conversationally and when he started speculating, Matthew's thoughts went elsewhere. He couldn't go home empty-handed... and at this stage, it didn't look like he could fall onto his other ideal named victims. Ivan was too risky and Roderich's suburb was crawling with activity...

So he'd have to satiate his hunger with appetizers instead of a full meal...

He started walking in the direction of the park.

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A few kills later and Matthew could really feel the difference. His shoulders were light and the stress of the night and morning were non-existent as his confidence crept back in. He shoved the leash into his backpack as he left the wooded area and into the city streets, feeling very much like the terror he was supposed to be.

Going home no longer seemed like an obligation anymore and taking care of everyone would be a *delight*, not a burden. It meant he could get in close to the action and he wanted to slap himself for

his pathetic mindset earlier.

If he was so confident that he could lure *anyone* into the park, then surely he could manufacture and manipulate social outcomes despite the cards being stacked against him.

Starting with Alfred.

As much as Matthew was still frustrated with his brother, that frustration was a blessing because it removed all guilt. Matthew wouldn't second guess himself when it came to his twin because he could just remind himself that Alfred deserved what Matthew did and used him for because Alfred owed him that much.

A bit twisted, but it was Alfred's fault.

Matthew was confident he could discover what happened by making Alfred spill... he just had to get creative about it.

And if he didn't find out by tomorrow... Matthew wasn't opposed to heading to where all the police were swarming. He could definitely fly under the radar to get the information he wanted... Risky but possible.

He just hoped it wasn't time sensitive, otherwise if Alfred wouldn't spill, then the scene the police were covering up would likely disappear and Matthew would be left with *only* Alfred to get information from.

And the internet, but he had a feeling his twin would be a much more reliable source... considering it was obvious that Alfred had witnessed something *in person*.

And what was a little risk? Matthew was confident and it was a calculated move and if he didn't have the strength to poke and prod then he was just as weak as before.

Chapter End Notes

Fully to be dramatic, but I need a hiatus for this fic. I don't have any chapters left/stored/prewritten like my other fic so I'll have to catch up writing once I deal with some stuff in my life.
There was a 'one in a 15 years' emergency event in my local area that was made worse by extreme weather and human nature (joke). It was kinda like a preview for apocalypse because not only did all power and reception go down, the 911 equivalent went down and people were advised via emergency broadcast to drive themselves to the hospital. The event itself lasted less than 24 hours but still, people were not happy afterwards. Also now, I'm sick and I don't think I can look at screens and focus on writing sentences for too long. So once I recover I'll write a few more chapters because I don't like living chapter by chapter and then I'll start posting again on my fortnightly schedule.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

> Hello again! Long time no traumatising! I'm keen to get back into it >:) The only thing that can stop me now is writers block mwahaha
>
> Also, I don't have IOS so that's why I chose whatsapp (not that I have that either ahaha I'm an antisocial hermit) so if there's details missing or strange that's why. So there's no foreshadowing in the little details on the platforms like that. But elsewhere? Maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Somewhere deep down, Matthew knew it was going to be like this. At least he wasn't navigating new territory. The walk home had been lovely and left him with a sense of peaceful determination that remained unshaken, even when the moment he opened the front door.

Alfred knew.

Matthew acknowledged some fleeting pity for his cousins, who were bearing the brunt of Alfred's *breakdown*. One reminiscent of last night. Alfred was pacing and pulling at his hair as he sobbed, muttering words that were nearly impossible to distinguish through heaving breathing and choked tone. He must've been at it for a while, if Matthew was reading the tense and exhausted looks correctly.

Matthew slipped his backpack off and slunk past the scene to put it in his room when a hand came down on his shoulder.

"Mate," Steve spoke in a hushed tone as he pushed Matthew further into his room. "Where have you been?"

"I just needed to get something from the store and got held up," Matthew shrugged and discreetly kicked his bag under his bed. "What did I miss?"

Steve pulled a face of discomfort and Matthew couldn't help feeling amused at his cousin's distress.

"I know about Arthur," Matthew sat on his bed, hoping to keep Steve present. "Is that the only reason why Alfred's upset? Really?"

"Ah, yeah I reckon that's the only reason. That I know of, at least." Steve sucked in a breath as he sat beside Matthew. "But nah yeah, I get it's deffo upsetting but com'on, he's carrying on like a pork chop! I'm glad you aren't though. I dunno what I'd do if both of you were carrying on..."

Matthew just nodded as he thought about how he could steer the conversation in the direction of his liking.

"Anyways," Steve slapped his hand on Matthew, making him sway. "I'll admit, I'm at a loss here. I'm not the most sensitive bloke, that's definitely your strong suit."

Steve pat Matthew's shoulder, holding his hand there. Alfred could still be heard from the other room, along with Zach's faint and indistinguishable voice trying his best to negotiate with a terrorist.

"I don't know what to do," Steve winced. "Does Al get like this often? When this... serial killer stuff comes up?"

"He has a couple of times... I guess he's just taking it pretty badly," Matthew shrugged in Alfred's defence. "He's not exactly open about it so I can't tell you much."

"Ah fuck, that's helpful," Steve squeezed his shoulder before his voice became almost pleading.

"I know I've given you a rough time in the past for being so sensitive... but there's nothing wrong with being a bit different. Especially since now this situation seems like a job for you-"

"***FUCK OFF!***" Alfred had a sudden outburst.

"*Crikey*," Steve exhaled sharply as he finally took his hand off Matthew, and crossed his arms as his eyes bulged in silent commentary.

"Why didn't you and Zach just walk away?" Matthew remarked, a little speechless at just how *horrible* Alfred was being towards his *favourite cousins*.

"Cus we're not shit cunts. We're good cunts. There's a difference. It's just too bad Al's not listening cus I told him to give me his phone and I'd deal with it."

"What do you mean?" Matthew's eyes darted to Steve's.

"Someone- well, I reckon it would be a couple of people, actually," Steve huffed, clearly unimpressed with the whole situation. "Point is, he keeps getting calls and instead of picking up, or *putting his phone on silent*, he just yells '*fuck off*' at the phone!"

Matthew nodded. He imagined the calls were probably related to Arthur's grave reveal and Matthew predicted he would receive exactly *none*. But that was expected and completely okay.

There was also the possibility that the calls were related to last night... He could always investigate the call log later, once Alfred had been separated from his phone...

"Where's his phone?" Matthew asked. From the living room, he could still hear Zach's drowned-out voice trying to console and negotiate. While Matthew couldn't make out the words, he *could* make out just how *fatigued* Zach was.

"Fuckin' in his pocket. He won't give it to me to sort out so I just feel like a beached whale. I don't know why he won't give it up or put it on silent on something. *Struth*, has he got himself a sheila that he's hoping to root or something?"

Steve shook his head after a particularly loud noise from the living room.

"How are you and Zach?" Matthew put care into his tone, "I mean, Arthur was your cousin too."

"Oh, ya'know. Is what it is..." Steve just shrugged and glanced away. "I know Artie would've been pissed but at least he's not here to see it."

Zach crept into Matthew's bedroom, quietly and slowly shutting the door.

"How's it going then?" Steve chuckled.

"I'm sure he's been better," Zach grimaced.

"Don'tcha worry, Matt here's gonna deal with it," Steve poked his thumb towards Matthew, who took this as his cue to go.

"Okay, just stay in here. I'll be able to help Alfred best if it's just us, eh?"

"Yeah, no worries," Steve kicked back on Matthew's bed and held his phone up. "I've got plenty of charge and heaps of hours of footy to get through. I'm sure Zee's got some sheepshagging vids so I bet he's all set."

Zach just glared tiredly at Steve who cracked a smirk, never opposed to a joke no matter the situation. Figuring they would stay away, Matthew slipped from the room to deal with the raging bull that was Alfred.

But he found his twin sitting on the couch, still and *silent* as he had with his face in his hands. His glasses were sitting on his head, completely fogged up.

"Al?" Matthew approached, kneeling in front of him. His brother suddenly sniffled deeply as his head snapped up.

"*What?*"

Alfred's face was stained with tears and his eyes were *red*. Matthew knew he'd have to tread carefully.

"Do you feel better?"

"Course I fucking *don't*," Alfred spat, out of breath. "*Everything's falling apart*."

Matthew ignored how his brother's voice broke, instead nodding in support.

"I know. It's fucked it, eh?" He smiled and kept his tone light as he did Alfred a *favour*. "The Chief is awful, isn't he?"

"*What?*" Alfred shook his head and blinked in sheer confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"The Chief leaked Arthur's grave to the press."

Alfred's face didn't move as he processed the news. His glazed-over eyes stayed focused on something past Matthew as they welled up with tears. Matthew gave him a moment before speaking again.

"This is just a ploy to catch the Trail Killer... it's fucked up and horrible for us and Arthur... but the Chief is just doing everything he can."

"How do you know that?" Alfred's voice was completely choked and sounded nothing like Matthew had heard before. "Fucking- he can't do that."

Matthew stayed silent and watched.

"Why would he do that?" Alfred was mostly talking to himself now, fisting his sleeves as trembling hands came up to his face to wipe the excessive moisture with the fabric. "Fuck... *fuck...*"

Knowing that Alfred was highly susceptible and unlikely to question anything, Matthew continued. It wasn't going to come back to him anyway.

"The Chief had this planned for a while... he's in with the media. Remember when there was that media blackout?"

"Shouldn't he have asked someone first? Can he do that without asking us?" Alfred sniffled hard as no matter how much he wiped, tears kept flowing and wouldn't stop. "Can I get a lawyer?"

"Unfortunately, he's allowed to do that," Matthew sympathised.

"Fuck! But now everyone knows where Artie is..." Alfred's breathing hitched and he forced it down, gasping for breath instead.

"Al..." Matthew shuffled a little closer as he weighed up his next choice. Should he tell him that Arthur wasn't the only grave the Chief leaked? That would certainly get a reaction.

"What?" Alfred's voice was thick and would be unrecognisable in any other situation, but at least his tears had stopped.

Matthew bit his lip and sighed. He had to be smart.

"Don't you think Arthur would've wanted this," Matthew carefully placed a hand on Alfred's knee and squeezed.

"I don't know," Alfred sniffled. "*Maybe?* I know he would've wanted his *killer*-"

Alfred stammered over the word killer and took a deep shaky breath. Something in his eyes looked far away as suddenly a new wave of tears came. Matthew just rubbed Alfred's leg with one hand while the other reached for a box of tissues.

"Yes, Arthur would've wanted this," Matthew asserted to convince Alfred and make him okay with this. "Besides, it means that he'll always be remembered."

"He's gonna be famous before me," Alfred chuckled, but the humour didn't reach his bloodshot, baggy eyes. But he did take the tissues and Matthew took that as progress.

He wasn't going to tell Alfred who was responsible for Ludwig's grave being leaked... if Alfred told Gilbert, who was wildly unstable... Matthew might just lose his inside to the police department if Gilbert decided to blow up and spite his grandfather.

Still, telling Alfred would've been so satisfying. But Matthew could put his pleasure on hold. It would be all the more satisfying to tell them in the future. The perfect time to tell Gilbert would be before the Trail Killer murdered him.

"Exactly. And if having his grave leaked catches the killer, then he would be happy," Matthew reasoned.

"I guess..." Alfred pressed his hands to his face as he began breathing deeply, trying to get himself under control. "I guess- okay. It's really shit but it's not *that shit* that I should be like *this*!"

Matthew just knelt there silently, hoping his presence helped and waiting to see if Alfred would say more.

"I think I've just bottled everything up or something," Alfred sighed in defeat, using the tissues to blow his nose and scrub his face before tossing them on the floor. "*Fuck*, I know I'm acting like such an asshole right now and I was such a dick to Steve and Zach-"

Alfred's phone rang and his demeanour changed *instantly*. He ripped his phone from his pocket to check it and once he saw who was calling he grit his teeth.

"Can you just ***fuck off***?" His voice was too shit to speak louder than a mutter and Matthew managed to catch a glimpse of the caller ID before Alfred forcefully declined.

"What's going on?" Matthew pressed. "What does Antonio want?"

"I don't know but I'm too fucking busy to care!" Alfred slapped his phone face down on the couch. "He probably just wants to tell me that the Chief was planning on being a big asshole like usual- *Fuck*, I know I'm being such a bad host right now. And a shit cousin and a shit friend- *Fuck*, I'm just a bad *everything*, aren't I?"

Alfred ripped out a handful of tissues and quickly brought them to his eyes as his breath wavered. Matthew followed his movements, biting his lip as he thought about what he could do.

"Why don't you wash your face?" Matthew suggested softly, glancing over Alfred's *red* face, likely burning and in need of some soothing water.

Alfred blinked at Matthew's suggestion, taking a moment to process it as if he didn't realise that was an option.

"I think you should, it would be more effective than using tissues and it would feel nice." Matthew put his hand on the couch as he slowly transferred to sit on it.

Right on top of Alfred's phone.

"Uh, maybe," Alfred cleared his throat and tossed the tissues on the ground with disdain. He closed his eyes tightly and rubbed his face. "Okay, yeah I will."

Alfred stumbled into the bathroom and Matthew heard the tap running. He knew he didn't have long so he quickly unlocked Alfred's phone and checked the call log.

There had been a couple of different callers, but Matthew was not prepared for the sheer percentage of the calls coming *overwhelmingly* from Antonio. Half of them didn't have a voice message, but the other half had voice messages that met the duration limit. There was no way Matthew could listen to them all.

There were missed calls from Yao and Ivan, both with short voice messages that Matthew quietly played as he continued his snooping. Both had called for the same reason; to offer condolences for Arthur. However, Ivan's included a demand that Alfred call him back to talk about last night. Matthew doubted that would happen.

There were calls from other friends, the majority of them also left voice messages. Matthew noted they were all listed *after* Arthur's grave was leaked, so that didn't leave him with much. He closed the app to hide his snooping and listened to the water running in the bathroom as he considered his next move.

Which was to put Alfred's phone on silent. By doing so, something else caught Matthew's attention. Alfred's notification list was *long*. Every single incoming text was unopened and the oldest were dated from *before* Arthur was leaked... Alfred had been ignoring everything from the moment he got home that morning. Matthew knew that at some point, Alfred had picked up his phone and *didn't* check *anything* - or didn't *answer* anything, which was extremely out of character for him. Even with their cousins here, Alfred would've done it.

Matthew didn't hesitate and started looking through.

There were a couple of texts from Steve and Zach in a group chat that Matthew was *not* privy to, all dating to *before* they had walked through the door that morning. Interesting to read and roll his eyes at his typical exclusion, but irrelevant.

There were two texts from Kiku, radiating an awkward but endearing aura.

Kiku

Today

Friend
: I'm sorry to hear about Arthur.

Friend
: I am not the best at comforting but if you need anything, please don't hesitate to reach out

Mathias

Today

Friend
: Hey I didn't know where Arthur was but it's a shame that everyone's going to go there now

Friend
: I hope it's alright with you but I'm going to go visit him

Friend
: We should definitely catch up another time! I'll shout you some beer and we can have a drink for Arthur, sound good?

Tino

Today

Friend

> Hey Al, I hope you're doing alright. Berwald and I are sorry to hear the news. I know it feels like Arthur's been victimised all over again but I know you can get through this. We'll look after Peter, we're just working out how to break the news to him. If you ever want to visit you're always welcome. Take care of yourself, okay?

Feli 🤌🤌🤌

Today

Friend
> Alfred im really sorry about Arthur. I dont know how Id feel if that was Lovino. I hope youre doing okay! Ill cook you some yummy food and buy you gelato when I see you next! Lovino would want you to know that youre only allowed to have proper gelato in the silver containers but I'll buy you normal ice cream if you want whichever one you prefer!

Friend
> Also Toni says you should call him because he needs to tell you something

Matthew *doubted* Antonio knew to tell Alfred who leaked the grave. Especially since the calling started *before* Arthur's reveal. Matthew sighed and reminded himself to be patient. He wasn't going to forget this, he just had to wait for the right moment. But he wasn't opposed to creating it.

Antonio sent too many texts to show them all on the small notification panel. Matthew didn't want to click on it and reveal that he had seen it, but what little he could see from just the panel concerned him.

Antonio:
he's not back!
CALL ME
please come over I'm worried I'm going to drink
Alfred I'm scared I don't know what to do I'm trying to be calm for Feli's sake

Those were just the last few messages of over *30* and Matthew *really* didn't know what to make of it.

A door creaked open. Matthew locked Alfred's phone and dropped it on the couch.

"Oi," Steve half whispered as he poked his head out. "It's quiet out here, reckon we can come out?"

Before Matthew could reply, Alfred walked out of the bathroom. His shirt was drenched and his eyes were still red, but his face wasn't and his demeanour was completely resigned.

"Yeah, come on out guys," His voice was raw but stable and Alfred slumped against the wall as he wiped his wet hands on his pants.

Steve and Zach shuffled out, standing apprehensively as they eyed Alfred.

"I'm really sorry about earlier guys," Alfred sighed, "I didn't mean to be like that and... I guess I've just been *really* stressed lately... and I've been insanely tired so... y'know."

Alfred rambled off awkwardly and Steve shook his head.

"Well, I suppose I'll let it slide just this once," Steve pulled Alfred into a side hug. "Just make sure you behave yourself next time, alright mate?"

"Okay," Alfred smiled slightly. "I'll try."

"So... feeling better?" Zach approached Alfred's other side, putting a hand on his arm.

"Yeah man, I'm totally over it," Alfred sighed. "Anyways, we should make the most of y'all being here and do something. I could use a distraction."

Once Alfred's mind was made up, there was no arguing. Not from their cousins and certainly not from Matthew.

But that was alright. The alternative was that Alfred go to bed, which wouldn't be much use to Matthew. And if Alfred woke up well-rested, he might just be motivated to go out again tonight...

Which Matthew *really* didn't want.

So with that in mind and after hearing another comment about Alfred being 'fucking tired', Matthew went to make his brother a coffee.

Chapter End Notes

I'll aim to adapt back to my usual update schedule or approximately every 2 weeks! Special shoutout to everyone invested in this story, thanks for your motivating support <3
Now, for a vague statement:

Chapter 40...

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

> Here's a little insight into Matthew's childhood... I finally had an opportunity to slip things in >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The atmosphere was subdued as everything mellowed out like Matthew hoped. Alfred had recovered and seemed to be gaining momentum as he slowly began acting more like himself, albeit a heavily sleep-deprived version. But Matthew was quick to give him a strong, sugary coffee.

From there he silently cleaned up the living room while keeping tabs on the casual conversation. Alfred had made a mess in his rampage, knocking things around and out of place. But they were easy enough to fix and Matthew didn't mind doing the chore, even if he knew it was expected of him. He couldn't see Alfred doing it. It gave him time to think about what he needed to do, but before he knew it the room was clean and he still didn't have a plan.

Matthew figured he'd have to look for or create an opportunity. He just needed to be patient.

Alfred skulled the whole coffee, but it was obvious he was exhausted. Even if he tried to hide it, their cousins were picking up on it too. Only they would chalk it up to his earlier breakdown.

Alfred flopped onto the couch as he continued to carry the conversation, wordlessly inviting everyone to sit around him. Matthew joined too, leaning forward to follow along with every word while his mind kept running. When the topic of conversation drifted to sports, Matthew knew he could rest easy. His participation wasn't mandatory here, leaving him to mull over *considerations*.

Whatever had Alfred so worked up last night and caused him to break down at Arthur's news had to be *something*. No doubt that something was the reason for Alfred's sudden burst of nervous energy making him very chatty, whether his brother was aware of that or not. But considering Alfred was determined to avoid thinking about it at all costs, Matthew would just have to pay attention to whatever Alfred *wasn't* happy to talk about. Sooner or later, his brother would let something slip.

Matthew also had to consider his brother's attitude towards Antonio and what was in those text messages. Antonio referred to a 'he' and the only thing that came to mind was *Gilbert*. If Matthew wanted confirmation, he'd just have to nudge the conversation towards the albino.

But Matthew didn't know how to achieve that, not when the others were having a good time as the earlier tension finally disappeared. He figured he'd have to pick another time to try and pry.

So he followed along, even when the topic turned to childhood memories. Matthew knew he was disqualified from participating because, for every fun story Matthew had, Alfred had about *twenty more*.

It was what it was, really. Thanks to these people, Matthew is who he is. He really couldn't picture being anyone else.

"Didn't I push your face into a cake one time?" Alfred tilted his head towards Steve, who just laughed.

"Yeah, I reckon. I still ate the cake though."

"I would too," Alfred chuckled. "Man, I was always such a piece of shit when it came to birthdays..."

"Not just when it comes to birthdays," Steve remarked.

"You make us look like saints," Zach added.

"Well in my defense birthdays are just fun as fuck," Alfred scoffed. "I made sure I always got to blow out the candles and cut the cake. Our parents always let me because they knew I'd bug them until I did."

"Oh, mate," Steve jumped in with a smirk, "Remember that time Matt beat you to it and you cracked the biggest sads cus you're a sookie baby?"

Zach chuckled as he looked back on the memory and Alfred had a sheepish look. Matthew briefly recalled it. He just wanted to blow out the candles one year and he knew he had to beat Alfred to it if he wanted to achieve it. He didn't have any thoughts on it, nor was there anything to it. At least, not *now*.

"Yeah, Arthur kept calling me a big crybaby," Alfred's smile turned sombre.

"Yeah cus you wouldn't stop raging so your parents had to relight it just for you," Steve barked out a laugh.

"Yeah well, remember that one time you guys were arguing about who made that weird cake thing?" Alfred clicked his tongue as he failed to remember the name.

"Pavlova?" Zach already knew the answer.

"Yeah nah, for the record I made that," Steve said seriously. Zach gave him the side eye.

"Are you guys really gonna argue about that again?" Alfred grinned. "Cus remember what I did while you guys were busy arguing?"

Matthew remembered. That had made one tense Christmas. He had been grateful for his invisibility then, but it still hadn't been enough. He still had to endure the turbulent environment of loud personalities with discomfort.

"You scoffed the whole thing cus you're a bloody pig," Steve chuckled, his tone reminiscent.

The conversation continued for hours and Matthew just sat there patiently as they continued to bring up memories and laugh. The mood had recovered and Alfred's breakdown was now just a memory. Matthew always wondered how Steve and Zach could be so laid back and unbothered, but that was probably part why today turned out okay.

At some point, Matthew stood to make dinner. His departure went unnoticed, which suited him just fine. Navigating the kitchen was second nature and something he could do with an occupied mind. Listening to the conversation just felt like listening to a radio, endless chatter running in the

background while kept biding his time. It definitely provided entertainment, especially when their cousins began bickering. Listening to siblings fight as a child used to fill him with a sense of relief that he never endured that. He used to hate witnessing it and it had been a great source of stress. But then as he aged and witnessed the connections others his age had with *their* siblings and family, he began to mourn that he would never experience a bond like that and it was too late to form one.

Now he just simply listened. It was just humourous at face value and nothing more. It was, and never would be anything more. A hard pill he had swallowed a long time ago.

"You know I'm more grown up than you are," Zach glanced smugly at his older brother. "Who'd call you mature?"

"Maybe, *your Mum*," Steve crossed his arms as he stared back. "Mum would deffo say I'm mature."

Alfred snickered in encouragement.

"Silence yank," Steve shook his head. "You're definitely the *least* mature here."

"HEY!" Alfred pulled a face. "I'm definitely more mature than you! I don't live with my Mom!"

At least not in the traditional sense, Matthew thought.

"You may be older, but that doesn't mean you're wiser," Steve grinned.

"I definitely agree with that," Zach made a point of glancing at his older brother.

"Oi, nah, you've still got your baby fat and still sleep with that sheep," Steve waved a hand dismissively.

"I didn't bring him here!" Zach exclaimed.

Matthew paused. He had a sinking feeling-

"Okay, so if sleeping with a stuffed toy means you can't be mature then I guess I'm more grown up cus I didn't have a stuffed bear," Alfred added.

Matthew leaned on the kitchen counter with his nails digging into the cool surface.

"You really never had a stuffed bear?" Steve asked pointedly.

Alfred shook his head proudly.

"Yes you did."

Alfred glanced in Matthew's direction, and Matthew realized his tone was a little too forceful and took a deep breath. *Maybe that's the only reason he was heard*.

"You had a brown grizzly bear," Matthew continued, hands braced on the counter. "You lost it, eh?"

"Oh yeah," Alfred chuckled lethargically. "Kinda forgot about that."

"Convenient," Steve smirked.

"Yeah but I never said I slept with it so that makes you so not mature," Alfred pointed at Zach, who just tilted his head thoughtfully.

"What happened to your bear?"

"I dunno, just lost it somewhere," Alfred shrugged.

Matthew's entire body was stiff and he had to remind himself to *breathe* as he focused entirely on listening to the conversation. Alfred never treated his things well. Matthew did. So when Alfred inevitably lost or broke something... Matthew was expected to share. His reward for responsibility was *Alfred*.

If Matthew could feel anything besides resignation right now, he'd be mentally cursing out Alfred and thinking of revenge. Something he was now very capable of since he had broken free of his facade. But instead Matthew just *stood there* with a stomach sinking below into the depths of familiar waters.

It had been years since this subject had last been referenced... let alone confronted.

"That reminds me!" Steve snapped his fingers, "Remember that white bear Matt had? I cannot for the life of me remember that little guy's name. You've gotta gimme a clue because Zee reckons he didn't have a name and I know that's wrong."

Matthew started blankly at Steve. Later he'd wonder why his stupid cousin asked Alfred that and *not* Matthew, especially when he was standing *right there*. But he didn't even consider that. Not when he was suddenly overcome with the urge to *leave* and found himself outside. He didn't even notice the change in lighting as the sun cast long shadows over the street and the temperature was a stark difference from inside.

At least outside he could actually *breathe*.

Matthew sat down on the cold driveway, still feeling detached from himself as he tucked his knees in close with a sigh. Outside was nice and peaceful. The street was empty and the eerie quietness didn't bother him at all. It comforted him. Gave him room to *think*.

'Matthew' was haunted by Kuma... and Matthew was haunted by 'Matthew'.

But Matthew was left with a strange feeling when he thought about Kuma. He could remember everything as clearly as he had before... but he just didn't care. For the first time in his life, the thought of Kuma didn't evoke *anything*.

Throughout the years, remembering Kuma ruined his whole day. Making him angry and sad. He would curl up in his room and cry from the remorse and grief until he was empty and that must be what he was feeling now. Completely empty. Or perhaps, he had finally grown past it. But that didn't mean Matthew would forget anytime soon. Let alone forgive...

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

Matthew and Alfred were given matching bears on the first day of school. Their parents thought it was cute because they were twins and it was something to celebrate one of many milestones that set things in motion a long time ago. But Matthew didn't like to think of his schooling experience. It

was a source of disappointment and distress that he was better off blocking out. At least now, he was in control of where he chose to be and who he could surround himself with. To a degree...

Matthew took a breath and focused on remembering with passive interest.

Alfred took his bear everywhere and didn't exactly treat it well, but apparently, that was expected of a child. He played rough with it and dragged it through hell. It was hardly a surprise when it lost an eye but Alfred cried all the same. Between their parents and Arthur, that thing had been patched up nearly every other week.

Until Alfred lost it. And their parents made Matthew share *Kuma* against his will.

Maybe if he had put up the same kind of fuss Alfred did, Matthew could've got his way. But hindsight was cruel. Alfred's bear only got tended to because Alfred made a *scene*. If only Matthew had thought to do the same... but he knew 'Matthew' didn't have the courage. And had *'Matthew'* made a scene about having to share *Kuma*...

Things might have ended *differently*.

But that road of 'what if' thought was one well travelled and Matthew didn't feel the need to beat a dead, rotten horse. No one noticed the stench but him.

The end had always hurt but today was a milestone because Matthew could recount everything in crystal clear detail *without* tearing up. But the resentment was still there, and always would be until he took his last breath. He resented everyone, but the person he resented most...

One day, Matthew was making pancakes because his brother asked and his parents told him to do it. They were busy, like always. Alfred started being stupid and Matthew had been too busy making pancakes and *not paying attention* to see that Alfred had gotten Kuma *drenched* in maple syrup. Because of that, Mom decided that Kuma had to go. Because *he* was *sticky* and *gross*.

That was it.

Matthew didn't want to lose Kuma, but he couldn't argue with an *adult*. He had no voice. There was nothing he could do. Nothing he could say. Even if he wanted to scream.

He *watched* Kuma be discarded in the trash. He explicitly remembered standing there, telling himself that he was a big boy and that he could handle it. But he knew he was only telling himself that because he was repeating his mother's words. She said he shouldn't have *it*, referring to Kuma as some *thing*, all because he was 'too old'. Because he was growing up and didn't need 'it' because 'it' was old and *raggedy*.

Matthew could've pulled Kuma out of the trash. He could've done it then, or he could've done it after, once no one was looking and wouldn't yell at him. He *should've done it*.

But he didn't. And once the bin was collected and taken away, he could never get Kuma back. That was the biggest regret in his life. He hated thinking about it and as he grew and thought about it more, the resentment grew too.

It would've been possible to fix Kuma. Why didn't his mother just try? And if she didn't care to put the time and effort into it herself, why did she prevent Matthew from doing it? Why wouldn't she

let him try? Or why not force Alfred to actually fix something he had broken for once in his *fucking* life instead of letting him off the *fucking* hook?!

Why couldn't she see how much Matthew cared about Kuma? *Why*?

Why didn't she care...?

Matthew rolled his shoulders and loosened his hold on his knees when he realised how *tense* he got. His breath was coming out in a slightly irregular pattern and Matthew took a deep breath to reset.

The person he *had resented most* had always been himself. 'Matthew'.

But now he could accept his past actions. He could... if he knew the definition of the word instead of the obligation of it- *forgive himself*.

And only himself.

Because he was the victim and everyone had wronged him. Not one person cared or thought about him. And it wasn't just about Kuma. It was about everything.

But Kuma had hurt for so long. Because Matthew didn't want to be without his best friend he had spent many sleepless nights wishing he could rewrite the past and act differently. But he couldn't and he couldn't accept it.

Even now as he closed his eyes, he could still see Kuma. Could still feel him. Matthew knew what it felt like to squeeze him and what his fur felt like when engulfed in a hug.

He just wanted Kuma back...

And now he had reached a point where he could accept it. That it happened, and couldn't be undone. It felt strange to consider it a milestone, but that's what it was. When he thought about it, he was surprised it didn't happen sooner. He'd been doing a lot of developing as he left his past self behind, it only made sense he'd leave this behind too. Now his growth was tangible.

He didn't need Kuma back, he could live without him. It was a shame, but Matthew wasn't going to mourn any longer. His eyes were focused on everything in front of him, on the opportunities that he had fought for and the things he had yet to achieve. He wouldn't be looking back.

Chapter End Notes

Until next chapter!

ALSO I can't believe I forgot to mention this but 1no_ro on tiktok made an animation based on this fic! https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8rtnFx4/ it's pretty cute and creative!

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

I've been looking forward to this very much. Please enjoy >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Matthew went back inside, everyone was exactly where they were before. Dinner was still in progress, just as he left it and Matthew resumed that duty out of habitual obligation. He should've made Alfred order a pizza. His brother wouldn't have been opposed.

But Matthew liked to follow through on the things he started. *Including* getting information from Alfred, one way or another.

Dinner was uneventful. Matthew served it up early so Alfred could eat and go to bed before the curfew even started. Matthew wasn't opposed to utilising his guilt about breaking down in front of his cousins to keep him in place.

Coincidentally dinner was served before the news, which interestingly enough, was brought up by *Steve*. While it was possible Alfred had forgotten the Chief of police was making an announcement, Matthew couldn't be certain that was the reason for his silence.

Matthew considered making small talk and getting information during dinner, but he doubted he'd get gritty or unfiltered information with their cousins present. But something could still be revealed from the news. Another benefit of serving dinner before the Chief's announcement was that there would be nothing else for Alfred to focus on.

Steve navigated the TV channels while Matthew sat beside Alfred, who had his nails between his teeth as he curled up tightly on a single armchair. There was a faraway look in his eyes that made Matthew wonder if Alfred would even pay attention to the news at all. But the moment Steve picked up the remote, Alfred seemed to shrink.

All chatter ceased when the news began and the Chief's familiar face appeared on the screen. He was standing behind a podium outside the police precinct, surrounded by microphones with his signature intimidating scowl that was only enhanced by the camerawork giving him a foreboding sense of importance.

Alfred exhaled and slightly shifted to relax, all without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Tonight's announcement will be short and to the point. I cannot spend additional time on public appearances besides what is strictly necessary," The Chief stated, glancing down as he shuffled papers. "The incident the previous night will be reported in detail and promptly published in full. However to summarise and ease fears of the public, I will inform you that we were made aware of a suspicious individual and given the current situation, the department reacted appropriately and swiftly."

"Mate, this's the shit we're missing out on," Steve muttered to Zach, gesturing with the remote. "You won't get shit like this in the outback."

"Good..." Zach's face was one of concern.

"An incident occurred last night," Chief Beilschmidt's eyes narrowed towards the camera and Matthew could see the malicious turmoil behind them. "The public will not be privy to the details at this time but in the near future, I will make an announcement as we are treating this incident seriously and in everyone's best interest for complete transparency."

Alfred wasn't moving and Matthew wasn't even sure if he was breathing. His eyes were wide and his body was stiff. It reminded Matthew of rigour mortis. The colour of his brother's face was corpse-like too.

"However, due to the serious nature of said incident," The Chief continued. "Until further notice, curfew will be enforced from dusk to dawn with no exceptions. Effective immediately."

"Oh fuck off!" Steve sat up straight. On the screen, the reporters erupted into questions as they scrambled for answers. Chief Beilschmidt silenced them all.

"This is necessary and non-negotiable. We have reason to believe that the Trail Killer is very much active and a threat to public safety. We will not be taking any chances."

The Chief continued to give answers to questions he no doubt orchestrated, having no problem making himself an overreaching authority figure and Matthew couldn't imagine anyone feeling like they could challenge him.

But considering Matthew had been abiding by the curfew, he was really curious about *what* could lead the police to believe that the Trail Killer was still active? His theory of the police spotting a vigilante came to mind and Matthew wondered if Ivan had been lying about *not* being spotted. Considering the voice message stating he had to talk with Alfred... it gave the theory merit but still didn't account for the puzzle pieces that were Gilbert and Antonio.

Matthew was pulled from his thoughts when he realised he could hear heavy breathing and turned to see Alfred gasping for breath, eyes wide and fingers digging into his thighs as he listened to the Chief's every word. Steve and Zach realised too, both jerking with concern.

"Oi, come on mate," Steve chuckled uncomfortably. "If Arthur were here he'd say no need to lose your head."

Alfred twitched violently and slapped his hands over his mouth. Before anyone could blink, he leapt up and bolted for the bathroom. While everyone sat in shock as they heard Alfred throw up, Matthew knew he had to act.

"Steve," Zach looked equally uncomfortably concerned.

"I know," Steve grimaced. "*Fuck*, I just don't know what to do."

"Let's just stay out of the way until you work on your sensitivity..." Zach turned to Matthew. "I think you should deal with that."

"It's okay," Matthew reflexively reassured as he ran to the bathroom, more than happy to take over. He flicked on the light and shut the door before kneeling beside Alfred.

His brother was panting over the toilet bowl, his glasses shoved up hastily on his messy, sweaty hair as his twitching hands gripped the porcelain. Matthew pat Alfred's back while his brother's chest *heaved* as he fought for breath.

It was reminiscent of last night and earlier that day. Alfred was choking on tears as his empty stomach continued to lurch and his knuckles were turning white to keep himself from falling to the floor.

Their cousins could only take Alfred's panicked state at face value and assume he was overwhelmed by the broadcast, but Matthew knew there was more to it. Matthew tried his best to calm Alfred, rubbing his back and repeating coaxing words, but it was difficult. Something had really taken hold of him and Matthew knew this was about what happened last night.

Eventually, the tension bled out and Alfred slumped against the dirty toilet, his hands coming to loosely thread his hair and rest on his head. He wasn't crying or panicking anymore, but he wasn't exactly *here*. Exactly like last night.

"Alfred," Matthew called his name until he got a response; a slight glance. "Just keep breathing, everything's okay."

Alfred sniffled and tried to reply, but instead he croaked as nothing intelligible came out. That just made Alfred frustrated and Matthew kept patting him on the back.

"Is it Gil?" He asked carefully. He didn't want to seem insensitive, but he wasn't going to hold back his questions out of *fear* or constrictive *consideration*.

Alfred's eyes darted to Matthew's and were already tearing up. Matthew reached for some toilet paper to offer Alfred as he started choking on his own breath.

That probably was the best Matthew was going to get from Alfred now, especially when his brother was curling up on himself and rocking on the floor while making noises Matthew had never heard before. It made him feel... weird and uneasy. He didn't like watching this. And deducting that whatever happened last night could've had something to do with Gilbert made him feel... upset about it. *Somehow*.

Maybe because he didn't know if it threatened his master plan or not.

But it was hardly the end of the world like Alfred was making it out to be. If Gilbert had just been arrested, he would be safe. Even if his grandfather made him wish he was dead, Gilbert would be off the hook soon enough solely because of his connection to the most powerful man in the city.

Well, second most powerful man.

But Matthew still felt like he was missing something. Making assumptions felt dangerous. Maybe Ivan was spotted *and* Gilbert was caught. Matthew couldn't see a reason to become stricter with the curfew just because of Gilbert. Unless his own grandson was the reason that the Chief realised vigilantes were a possibility and didn't want anyone else to become inspired by Gilbert's stupid actions. That would explain the current lack of explanation.

But could that explain Alfred?

None of the pieces fit together. It was frustrating!

Matthew just sat there, leaning against the wall as he watched his brother shiver and hug himself.

"Alfred, do you want to talk about it?" It seemed pointless to ask, but Matthew was determined to try. "What's wrong?"

"Oh my God..." Alfred swallowed thickly as he glanced around. "I... I can't..."

Matthew kept trying to coax a response but Alfred ignored him as he sat up and rubbed his face lethargically but forcefully.

"What the fuck..." Alfred groaned, his hands sliding up to his hair to pull on it. "Okay- it's okay."

"*Alfred*," Matthew stressed as he sat opposite and tried to force eye contact.

"*What*?" Alfred snapped, meeting Matthew's eyes as he pulled his hair. "Fucking what?"

Matthew internally sighed but didn't let it show.

"I'm worried Alfred, can't you see how you're acting? I've never seen you this upset before." By sounding *concerned* and *scared*, hopefully Alfred would see that Matthew was just trying to be nice. "Please tell me what's going on."

"Okay- *that*," Alfred swung his arm out to point at the bathroom door, "*that* was an *accident*, okay? Just- I'm just fucking tired, okay?"

Clearly, Alfred didn't want to talk to him. Didn't want to admit to anything *not* heroic. Matthew threaded his hands together as he thought about his next move. He needed a new angle. He didn't want to keep pushing 'Well, why are you tired? What's making you tired?' because he just knew he'd get shut down and make Alfred *more* aggressive and defensive.

But then his brother sighed.

"I'm just tired of this going on for so long," Alfred said, clearing his voice and glancing away as his voice cracked. Matthew knew he felt guilty for snapping. "I just want the good guys to win, y'know?"

"Of course," Matthew nodded vigorously. "But why were you sick? Please don't tell me dinner made you sick?"

"No, uh, I just didn't feel well already. Cus I'm tired. Okay?"

"Okay," Matthew sighed. He wasn't getting anything from Alfred tonight. "I think you should go to bed then."

At least then he could get his brother's phone and properly snoop. Alfred would never tell Matthew anything, but he'd tell his friends *everything*. Especially the other vigilantes...

He'd have to, if Alfred wanted to warn them about whatever he saw...

"Yeah, I guess I should," Alfred agreed but didn't move a muscle. Matthew stood and offered his brother a hand. He could put him to bed and take his phone under the guise of concern, something that Alfred was unlikely to argue about in this susceptible and avoidant state.

But when Matthew opened the bathroom door for his brother, Steve was on the other side presenting a bottle of Baileys. Alfred faltered and grabbed onto Matthew's shirt as if to pull him back or push him in front.

"I've got just the thing to cheer you up mate," Steve declared. "You've gotta try a Tim Tam slam."

Matthew internally facepalmed at another *stupid* wrench being thrown into his plans. *Especially* when Alfred put on an act of brightening up and *agreed*. Because the word 'no' just wasn't in his vocabulary.

At least apologising *was*, even if it was to sweep whatever just happened under the rug. Alfred seemed to relax when Steve let him off the hook and continued pushing a drink.

Matthew didn't even argue. If Alfred was distracted and drunk - which Matthew expected would be the case because Alfred was *fragile* and didn't know what 'in moderation' was on a good day - then he would be distracted and could *misplace* his phone. Same result.

"Of course I'm down!" Alfred snatched the bottle from Steve to look at the percentage with a whistle. "Okay! Now what the hell is a Tim Tam slam?"

"Glad you asked!" Steve held up a packet of rectangular, chocolate biscuits labelled 'Tim Tams'. "Just watch what I do."

Steve took the bottle back and found a glass in the cupboard. He filled it to the brim with alcohol and took out a Tim Tam. With a grin, he bit off both ends before using the Tim Tam as a straw.

"Okay you look goofy as fuck," Alfred chuckled, watching with genuine interest and Matthew glanced around the room for his phone.

It was in Alfred's pocket. *Convenient*.

"So, whaddoya reckon?" Steve said. "How about we polish off some drinks and have a good night, yeah?"

"Yeah sounds good." Alfred nodded sheepishly. No doubt ashamed about being so weak in front of his cousins and determined to turn that perception around.

"Mate, we're gonna turn this night around, just you wait," Steve slapped Alfred's back supportively. "We should do some shoeys too, blast some music, have some fun!"

Matthew figured it would be entertaining to witness and if Alfred was inebriated, it would be easier to slip his phone then. It would also be possible to have Alfred slip information... if he could get him away from their cousins.

But one thing at a time.

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As expected, Alfred took it way too far. Not that anyone was going to tell him that. For every one drink Steve had, Alfred had *three*. Their cousins encouraged it. Considering they witnessed two breakdowns in less than twelve hours, they probably thought they were doing Alfred a favour.

And Matthew, who knew that number was *three* breakdowns in less than *twenty-four* hours, wasn't going to speak up. He wasn't here to look out for Alfred. He quit that dismal job a long time ago. Matthew was here to watch, cursed to ever lurk in the background. Everyone had forgotten he was there as they encouraged each other to engage in behaviour that had them spiralling towards becoming blindingly drunk.

It was entertaining. Matthew kept an eye on it, biding his time as he did his usual internet research and recon on his phone. He knew the Chief of police wouldn't appreciate all the speculation and frenzied discourse that was blowing up over his vague and panic inducing statement. He should've expected it.

Along with all the speculation also came the analysts. A growing portion of people on the internet seemed to suspect there was a conspiracy here and were determined to milk every scrap of knowledge to fuel it. Or to keep themselves entertained. Matthew loved to see it, even if sometimes the information was useless, like someone pointing out the Chief's face was caked with makeup during the interview.

Eventually, Matthew's patience paid off when Alfred stumbled blindly back to the bathroom after loudly proclaiming he loved his cousins. Steve and Zach repeated the sentiment before going outside to do shoeys...

"Alfred," Matthew came up behind him as he was washing his hands, "Do you love all your friends?"

"Fuck yeah man, I love everyone!" Alfred shouted to be heard, even though Steve took the speaker outside. Then he high-fived himself in the mirror. Matthew took note to consider weaponising alcohol in the future because it was evidently effective.

With his back turned, Alfred's phone was in his back pocket and facing Matthew. He slipped it out and handed it to Alfred.

"You should call Antonio back," Matthew urged. "He's probably really worried."

"Why..." Alfred groaned as he registered the phone and snatched it. "He's fine."

"You've been ignoring him all day..." Matthew replied and inched closer. "You've left him alone to juggle dealing with Gilbert and Feliciano, eh? I'd be worried he's feeling suicidal again..."

"*Oh my God...*" Alfred staggered over to the toilet and collapsed on the lid. His glazed-over eyes reflected the screen as he quickly found Antonio's contact. "Fuck... I'm such an asshole..."

He brought the phone to his ear. Antonio must've picked up because Alfred greeted him and immediately asked if he was going to kill himself. Matthew internally shook his head.

"Okay okay! I was just asking!" Alfred said defensively as his head rolled back, hitting the wall behind him. "I was just asking, man..."

Matthew loitered by the bathroom door, quiet and still. He knew that Alfred had forgotten he was there, his drunken state amplifying his usual disregard for him, making it likely Alfred would *finally* speak openly...

"Huh? Oh yeah... I might've had... I've lost count," Alfred chuckled, his words extremely slurred as Antonio said something. "Yeah, I'm drunk."

Antonio's voice could be heard through the speaker but it was only a muffled sound, not distinct words.

"Why? No- ugh, my cousins are here..." Alfred slurred, his head lolling slightly. "They're staying with me. So..."

Matthew would just have to piece things together through context.

"What?" Alfred ran a hand over his face. "Hear *what*?"

"Oh, yeah..." Alfred laughed bitterly. "I think I scared Steve and Zach cus uh, I was- it happened when they were here."

"No I'm fine, really! How are you? You're not feeling super stressed, are you? You'd tell me if you were wouldn't you?"

"Oh... I guess I just lost my phone," Alfred's tone became serious and he struggled to sit up. "It went flat. Why, what happened?"

"Dude... what? Where is he?"

Alfred swallowed thickly and sat up rigidly as he listened to the reply.

"Dude... did he- Oh fuck, *did he*-" Alfred slapped a hand over his mouth as he lurched and started breathing deeply. Matthew went to move forward and do something but held back.

"No no, I just drank too much- *ugh*," Alfred's shoulders heaved as he slowly slipped off the toilet and opened the lid. "I'm so sorry just gimme a minute."

Alfred managed to fight off the wave of nausea.

"Sorry... I might've drunk too much or somethin'... my bad."

Alfred wiped his sweaty hands on his pants.

"Um... so what do y'know?"

"Um... yeah I'm sorry that uh, I left you to deal with that... I forgot my cousins were gonna come 'round and uh... it's been a long night-*Day*. *Ugh*..."

Alfred's breath hitched and he lurched over the toilet. He gripped the bowl and fought it back.

"No uh, I'll... later- just keep talkin'." Alfred sighed, pressing his forehead to the brim.

"Okay um... I'll help you tomorrow," Alfred slurred. "I'll just ditch Steve and Zach."

"Yeah, they'll understand. I know they love sleepin' in and y'know, they've been drinking too."

"Nah I'll just have a' energy drink and take- ah fuck I don't even know what we have... I'll take pills. I'll be there."

"Toni, I said I'll be there." Alfred slurred with determination. "*I'll be there.*"

"*No*! I'm- I'm gonna stay home tonight. Just because then I won't get caught sneaking out and I don't want Steve to know what I'm up to."

"Um... look, we really need a big team meeting cus... y'know, the Chief is gonna announce somethin' and if it's what I think it is," Alfred pulled himself to sit. "It's... He needs to tell the truth or we're fucked."

Matthew leaned slightly. This was it. But instead of replying, Alfred's lips parted, but no words came. Antonio made noise on the other side.

"I can't- No, team meeting later, alright? I'll call tomorrow. Gotta go."

Alfred struggled to rip his jacket off as he heaved for breath and even in the limited light coming into the bathroom, Matthew could see sweat dripping down Alfred's hairline.

Once Alfred had finished throwing up, he pushed himself up and staggered out of the room without even noticing his brother. Leaving the toilet unflushed and his phone on the floor. Matthew picked it up and chased after his brother.

"Alfred, what are you doing?" Matthew asked, incredulous that his brother was already pouring himself another drink without even mixing it!

"Ah," Alfred swayed as he spun to squint at Matthew. "Um, I'm drinking. Why are you sayin' that like I shouldn't be doin' it."

"You need to call Ivan back!" Matthew held out the phone. "He's worried. He's going to want to talk to you about last night too."

Alfred's hand jerked and he accidentally sloshed the contents of his glass down his arm.

"Fucking hell, thanks a lot dickhead," He grunted. "Ivan'll be fine. I'll call him tomorrow."

Matthew sighed and put Alfred's phone into his pocket with an eyeroll. At least if his brother was going to drink until every single last brain cell was saturated in alcohol, then Alfred wasn't going to remember sending any texts to his friends.

But instead of joining his cousins outside, Alfred stared at the back door with a conflicted expression.

"You're really tired, aren't you?" Matthew discreetly reached for the bottle of alcohol and slipped it behind them. "Why don't you go to bed after that glass?"

"Cus Steve and Zach are here," Alfred scoffed, like it was obvious. "I'm supposed to hang with them."

"You can do that tomorrow," Matthew reasoned, pulling the mixers from view. "Or another time. You've hung out all day."

"I guess..." Alfred's face became more constipated as he glanced down at his drink. "Fuck... I really need this."

Matthew didn't question why it was a 'need', just watching his brother skull the whole thing while gripping the counter. Alfred ripped the empty glass away as he heaved for breath and searched the counter.

"Where's the uh..." Alfred gestured for the alcohol.

"They took it outside," Matthew frowned sympathetically.

"Oh..." Alfred's shoulders slumped as he bumped into the counter, slumping all his weight as his eyes never left it. "Where's those chocolate things... the tin-tins?"

"You used them all up," Matthew pat Alfred's back and let his hand linger, using it to push Alfred towards his room.

"Wait... shouldn't I say something to uh, Steve and Zach?" Alfred pressed a hand to his face.

"I'll tell them, okay?"

Alfred nodded and let Matthew lead him to bed. Once he shut Alfred in his room, Matthew took his brother's phone and opened the group chat with their cousins. He sent a message saying 'he' was going to go to bed but wanted them to party outside to their heart's content in Arthur's memory.

Matthew pocketed the phone and grabbed all the drinking supplies, sneaking them outside. His cousins didn't notice him, too busy sending a reply to 'Alfred' and discussing what was going on with him. Matthew didn't care to eavesdrop, leaving them to their devices as he grabbed a bucket, a bottle of water and some pills. When he was ready to return Alfred's phone, he'd bring everything in like the dutiful brother he was. But until then, Matthew retreated into his own room.

Finally, it was time.

The messages from their cousins weren't relevant, so Matthew swiped that notification away. He knew *exactly* where he'd start. But as he opened Alfred's messages, he heard something from his brother's room. It made him pause and consider if it was worth checking out, but when he heard a faint plea for "*help"* again...

He *had* to investigate.

Either his brother had gotten tangled trying to get under the sheets, explaining the *thud* that came next, *or*...

"*STOP IT-*"

Matthew pocketed the phone and grabbed Alfred's hangover kit before opening the door.

"Alfred, are you okay?" Matthew flicked the light and found himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

Matthew's entire body tensed as his eyes narrowed on the metal object pointed right at him. His fingers twitched, longing for the security of a knife as *action* flooded his veins. But instead, Matthew took a purposeful breath and met Alfred's eyes.

Was this how his victims felt? This *drop* as the rug was pulled? Matthew definitely felt off guard. It made him feel satisfied knowing that the people he hated felt *this*.

"Alfred," Matthew kept his tone calm, as if he was *stupid* and thought his brother had no reason to shoot. "You should put that down, you're drunk."

His brother was drunk, but Matthew wouldn't assume that was the reason for his shaking. Alfred was pale and his drawer had been practically ripped out in his haste for the gun.

Alfred's face morphed to one of horror as he realised just what he was doing. He threw the gun from his hands and shrieked at the noise when it clattered on the floor.

"Oh my God! Mattie!" Alfred scrambled back and leaned against his bed as his wide eyes never left his brother's. "Fuck- Mattie! I'm so sorry! I was just- ah-"

Matthew didn't say anything as he knelt in front of Alfred and passed him the bucket of supplies. Alfred instinctively took them with shaking limbs as he kept glancing between Matthew and the still open door.

"They're still outside," Matthew explained patiently.

"Who?" Alfred blinked before shaking his head. "No- yeah, okay."

Matthew didn't know what Alfred was worried about, but he shut the door. Alfred's eyes darted around his room before shoving his gamer chair into Matthew.

"For the door," he quickly explained, clearing up nothing.

"Alfred, I think you should drink some water." Matthew rubbed where the chair had hit and pushed it to the side.

Alfred nodded quickly and did just that, struggling to open the bottle with clammy and shaking hands. But when he kept glancing between the chair and the door, Matthew frowned.

"Do you want me to block the door?"

Alfred shuddered a 'yes' and Matthew wedged the chair under the handle. Then he picked up the gun and clicked the safety on. It wouldn't be wise to let Alfred have it again so he held it against his lap as he sat opposite his regretful brother. It felt strange, Alfred kept rambling apologies that Matthew had never heard before in his entire life. And now he was hearing them *all*.

He refrained from saying 'it's okay' and other similar sentiments because, no it wasn't and here was his opportunity.

"Alfred, I need to know what's going on," Matthew's tone was pleading and he hunched over himself as if he was scared. And why wouldn't he be? Alfred had *four* breakdowns and just pointed a *gun* at him. "Please, this has gone too far. I'm worried and I just want to know. You're scaring me."

Alfred's lips trembled and Matthew knew the guilt was eating him. Alfred always saw himself as the hero and now he pointed a gun at his own brother when he had no reason to become violent in his own home!

"O-okay," Alfred's voice trembled as if he was going to cry. "Just don't tell anyone yet cus I'm still figuring out what the fuck I'm supposed to do..."

Matthew nodded, tightening his hold on the gun in his lap. He knew that the instant Alfred decided to go out at night, he would demand the gun back. But until then, the gun was an unspoken hostage. A condition. Alfred could get it back once he spilled. Once he stopped having these breakdowns too, ideally.

Alfred was still rambling his apologies, likely due to alcohol so Matthew prompted him back on track.

"I'm living a nightmare," Alfred's voice was barely audible but Matthew still heard it crack. "Or awake nightmare? I dunno, I don't *freakin'* care... I just can't wake up from this shit."

Matthew remained quiet, knowing his brother would feel the urge to fill the uncomfortable silence.

"I-" Alfred shivered and he shakily reached for a blanket. "I *saw him*..."

The silence didn't prompt an explanation.

"Saw *who*?" Matthew pressed.

"*Him*," Alfred wrapped the blanket around himself tightly, his voice strained, "I saw *him*... he- *Trail Killer*..."

Matthew frowned. That was it? His brother had mistakenly seen someone? Matthew was disappointed... and relieved. He didn't know what he was, but he was *conflicted*.

It meant that he was safe, and that Alfred's paranoia and current traumatised state could be easily rectified. But that relief was selective. He still didn't know what was going on with the police and unfortunately, it didn't look like Alfred was going to clear that up.

"And he was standing," Alfred swallowed as he pointed to visually explain. "He was *there* and I saw him holding..."

"You didn't see him," Matthew said with certainty to give Alfred relief. "Maybe you just saw Ivan and didn't recognise him? Maybe that's why you thought you saw the Trail Killer, eh?"

Alfred became even paler as he shook his head.

"*No no no nonono* it *wasn't* Ivan. Ivan *wasn't* there and I *know* what *Ivan* looks like," Alfred took a shuddering breath. "I saw *him*-"

Alfred pulled his arms from the blanket and started gesturing like he was holding something.

"Maybe it wasn't Ivan," Matthew said softly. "But I know it wasn't the Trail Killer-"

"*Nonono* listen," Alfred paused and his eyes widened before meeting Matthew's. "*Fuck*- I just realised how fucked up it is- are you sure you really want to know?"

At least with a question like that, Matthew was going to get whatever Alfred believed the truth was.

Whatever, Matthew would let his brother get it off his chest and then reason with him. He couldn't do that until he knew what his brother had deluded himself with.

"Yes, I *need* to know Alfred."

"Okay," Alfred nodded and fisted the blanket. "Okay..."

There was a moment of silence and just when Matthew was about to prompt Alfred, he spoke.

"I should start at the start but only really remember... I remember watching and I see... *bits* of what happened... I was *stuck* there..." Alfred's face twisted in agony. "I was *stuck* and I didn't do anything. *I COULD'VE SHOT HIM*-"

Alfred sucked in a harsh breath as his chest started to heave.

"Alfred, *breathe*!"

"Yeah, I know," Alfred said quickly, panting like a dog as he forced himself to focus. "Um, so he was there and I was... maybe *ten* yards away from him... and..."

"And?"

"I'm *so* glad he didn't do that to Arthur-" Alfred choked as tears began to fall. "At least Arthur wasn't fucking *tortured*-"

Something didn't sit right in Matthew's stomach as he glanced around the room and passed his brother tissues.

"So... what did the Trail Killer do?"

"He *killed* him," Alfred snatched the tissue box and ripped a fistful out. "He- he was in *pieces*."

This wasn't going in the direction he expected...

"What?" Matthew's voice sounded like an echo as he fell back on his knees and looked at Alfred.

"He *cut* him up and- and he had him outside and he was-" Alfred made a stacking motion with his hands.

They weren't talking about Arthur. Who then??

"*How* am I gonna tell Toni tomorrow," Alfred wailed as he scrubbed at his face and Matthew's unease grew.

"*Alfred*," Matthew shuffled forward, heart in his throat. "Is Gilbert involved in this?"

"I don't know!" Alfred threw his hands up. "Toni said Gilbert didn't come home!"

Matthew's confusion was growing just as quickly as his unease. He didn't know what to think or what to expect and he didn't like that.

"But Rod-" Alfred choked and his chest shuddered. "*Roderich's his cousin*... so.... he's going to be involved... and- *I feel so bad for him*."

"*What?*"

"*I should've shot the Trail Killer when I had the chance!*" Alfred gasped for air and ripped out more tissues. "I can't *stop picturing it*..."

"*No*, what does Roderich have to do with this?" Matthew said clearly and slowly.

"Fuck! I told you this was a nightmare," Alfred pulled his hair. "I can't think right and I've gotta do something about it and help everyone tomorrow and Gilbert's fucking grandpa's gonna have to make an announcement about it because I swear to God if he sweeps that under the rug-"

"*Alfred*," Matthew said forcefully, shaking his brother's shoulders. "I don't understand! What happened?"

"Okay," Alfred shuddered and rewrapped himself tightly in the blanket. "I was walking around and I saw a shadow... it was moving and- I was in between some buildings and I just felt a *wave* go through me and I was frozen..."

Alfred looked Matthew in the eye and all Matthew saw was *fear*. The very same look on all of his victims.

"I saw him... outside Roderich's apartment... with Roderich..."

Alfred took a deep breath and forced himself to keep talking.

"He- Roderich was... um, I can't think of the word..."

Alfred's breathing paused as he freed his hands to roam over his body and made gestures that strongly implied-

"He was cut up... and... I didn't do anything..."

The gun slid off Matthew's lap and he didn't realise until Alfred jumped at it clattering on the floor.

"I shouldn't have told you," Alfred stuttered. "Fuck... *fuck*... I'm so sorry."

"That *wasn't*..." Matthew murmured as he picked up the gun and put it on Alfred's dresser. "Alfred... are you *sure* that's what you saw?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I kept questioning myself all day but... no. I know what I saw..."

Matthew just sat there.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

How's that for an evil plot point? >:) You may now theorise...

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

> In order to avoid formatting a whole texting conversation, I just included summaries (you'll see what I mean), but I slipped in all the information I wanted to >:) Hopefully it doesn't make it too hard to follow lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Matthew couldn't really remember what happened next. At least, not in explicit detail. Because the moment everything clicked inside his head, he couldn't escape the turmoil as suddenly reality seemed to slip.

Alfred took the gun back. Matthew didn't stop him. Alfred shoved it behind his back and ran through the house, making sure every single window and door was locked, almost locking Steve and Zach outside in his blind haste. When he realised they were in the backyard, Alfred became *frantic* as he demanded they come in.

They hesitantly complied, no doubt assuming it was *another* breakdown and walking on eggshells because of it.

Only once everything was locked and boarded up did Alfred return to his room with a hasty word of goodnight to his cousins and not a single explanation. They hesitantly replied and Matthew heard the wheely chair get jammed under his brother's door again. Because even though he had a functional lock, it wasn't enough for peace of mind.

Matthew didn't even bother saying anything to his cousins, instead, he just locked himself in his room. It was quiet and he could hear himself breathing as he stared blankly ahead. It was almost too easy, to let himself *slip* and just sit there like he had been put into storage. But he forced himself back into focus and quickly grabbed Alfred's phone.

He didn't know what he expected and now he was left with a bizarre feeling he couldn't interpret.

But his sense of determination was always there and as he unlocked Alfred's phone, he thought 'fuck it' and went into his brother's messages, uncaring if evidence of his crime would be left in the form of *read* receipts. He doubted Alfred would assume anything of it and given his current state, might even gaslight himself on Matthew's behalf.

It was obvious that Alfred was the only one who knew about Roderich. Or at least, he hadn't discussed it with anyone else and vice versa. Thankfully, there were more texts since Matthew checked earlier and he set about rifling through the entire history of conversations.

Antonio - There had been a flurry of text messages starting early in the morning detailing how Gilbert didn't come home. Antonio had been working himself into a frenzy worrying about the sirens and police swarm and what that meant for his best friend. Whether he'd been arrested or

worse... because none of them really believed the Trail Killer could be inactive, hence why they were all going out.

There were new texts. Gilbert had since come home, but dropped off by police. He insisted he hadn't been caught and arrested but he wasn't talking beyond that. Feli was apparently trying his best to cheer up his 'brother' but was becoming upset when it didn't work. Then Gilbert locked himself in the bathroom and took an hour long shower with loud music.

Antonio knew something was going on but he tried to focus his efforts on things he could do and look after Feli. Eventually, Antonio stopped updating, assuming that Alfred had been asleep this whole time and his last message was to beg him to respond as soon as possible.

Matthew felt bad for Antonio, he really did. Feliciano too... he figured that when he snuck Alfred's phone back into his room, he'd leave the messages from Antonio open so his brother would help. But considering Alfred's call with Antonio earlier, Matthew knew that his brother wouldn't neglect his friend for too long. He'd neglect his cousins instead.

Gilbert - There were texts from last night, detailing how he apparently tried getting information from his Grandfather and failed *miserably*. He then proceeded to rant *excessively* about how he doubted he'd ever get anything from his Grandfather ever again and would do everything he could to never be in the same room with him again because the man hated him that much and it was *mutual*. The rant continued with Gilbert angry that Ludwig was gone and saying he just *knew* that if his grandfather got to *pick* who was still alive and who wasn't...

Alfred tried his best to comfort his friend but it was like trying to put out a house fire with a toy water gun. Eventually Gilbert just stopped responding after dismissing Alfred entirely.

There texts from today... vague ones. Starting from about the time Antonio had texted to say the albino was home. Gilbert's texts said he *needed* to tell Alfred something but wouldn't if he ran to tell Antonio, convinced Alfred would weaponise whatever Gilbert had to say to keep him inside at night. He claimed that was never going to happen and he was sick of Alfred acting like he was weak.

He continued by calling the Trail Killer a monster and ranting about ripping him apart. Then ranting about 'Opa' not talking to him and only telling him the bare minimum about the thing that he had to tell Alfred.

There was a *lot* of pent up frustrations being smashed out on screen.

If Matthew had to make a guess... Gilbert knew that Roderich was gone.

Ivan - There had been some back and forth between him and Alfred yesterday about the previous night. There was speculation about what the extreme police response was about and just what the hell was going to be on the news. There was fear of another media blackout and the two of them had devised a scheme for Ivan to gather research.

There were more texts hours later about Ivan apparently striking up conversation with locals of the suburb where the police had been. He didn't claim to get any information and he didn't want to push it because even he could tell that things were uncertain. There were texts from that morning about how the same police response two nights in a row was suspicious and he knew there was more to it.

If Matthew had to take a guess, the implication of Ivan's voice message was he just wanted to discuss theories. Not because he had been spotted.

So... it looked like the police was oblivious to the vigilantes. Matthew breathed out a sigh. At least something was unchanged...

Kiku - It seemed that the two were in contact often, but there wasn't much relevance in their texting history beyond Alfred reminding Kiku to stay safe at night.

There were some texts today, where Kiku was worrying about the last two nights and what the police activity meant.

There were more texts after the two Matthew had read earlier, reading that Kiku had been in contact with Steve and knew Alfred wasn't doing well due to Arthur. Kiku stated he'd take it upon himself to inform everyone that Alfred hadn't been arrested and just wasn't available so no one would bother him while he was grieving. Then he repeated the sentiment of wanting to help Alfred in any way possible.

Matthew could read the ironic implication that this time; the other vigilantes were worried that *Alfred* had been arrested. And why wouldn't they? Usually, Alfred was way more chronically online and immediately *available*.

Mathias - Their texting history was mostly casual. Mathias always seemed to have something to say for every event. Alfred *always* engaged and there was a lot of Trail Killer discussions to scroll through, especially after the date of Ludwig's death. Clearly, Alfred found a place to rant in Mathias because he could take a step back from his involvement and just *vent*. Matthew wouldn't be surprised if Alfred never looped Mathias into the vigilante scheme solely because he wasn't sure if his friend would take it seriously. It was too easy to picture, Mathias roaming the streets, ecstatic to be included. Maybe the Trail Killer would have to target someone close to Mathias just so he could grow up a little... Not that Matthew found any pleasure in picturing Mathias' close friends fading by his hand. But until Mathias got a firsthand taste of the real-life grief that was plaguing the city, he would only see this as entertainment.

Probably a sign he was chronically online, as most of the internet was just sensationalising the Trail Killer. Matthew hated to think that this new killer could possibly receive the same treatment. Could be sensationalised and inspire *more*. Matthew didn't like the idea of that. The Trail Killer had started first and was creating a legacy that no one could live up to. He'd ensure it.

His massacre in the park basically ensured it. *He* did that. *He* would reveal it. And *nothing* could top it. Once it was revealed, it was basically guaranteed that the police would *never* let anyone else reach the heights he did.

All he had to do was hold out. He couldn't give in to the temptation of revealing his cards too early.

There was a text conversation yesterday where Mathias was more than happy to help investigate whatever happened the previous night. That was how Alfred learnt that the police had occupied and blocked off a whole area, not letting anyone in. When he told Alfred his suspicions of someone dying, Alfred freaked out about the police lying about the Trail Killer's involvement. That was when Mathias suggested that it might not have even been the Trail Killer at all. Alfred had assumed it was an accident or suicide and that was when Matthew had sent his brother to the shower because he was getting worked up.

Still, Matthew wouldn't be surprised if Mathias became an idiot vigilante without telling the others and then freaking them out when they all run into each other. It was amusing to picture... but the amusement was brief.

That would pose a threat to the current status quo and Mathias was a variable that he couldn't control. He needed to be taken care of.

Matthew considered the benefit of Alfred leaving his phone here when he left to play hero every night. Matthew could easily use the phone to text Mathias as Alfred and organise anything he needed to... then delete the messages so Alfred would never know.

That was... *if* his brother continued to go out at night.

It was an idea... even if it left a risky paper trail of evidence on Mathias' phone. But Matthew could find a way around it if his prompts to Mathias were just coincidental with whatever worked in the Trail Killer's favour.

Tino - Matthew only cared to look through their chat for one reason, one that was confirmed fairly quickly. Alfred knew about Peter.

Feliciano - Alfred had a long texting history with Feliciano, as expected. There wasn't anything relevant that stood out besides Feliciano running to Alfred whenever something happened. Well, whenever something happened that Lovino or Ludwig couldn't sort out.

There was also an exchange after the funeral... where Feliciano was trying his best to stand up for the Chief and give him grace. Claiming he was 'also grieving while dealing with the stress of leading the Trail Killer case'. While Alfred didn't budge on his opinion, he didn't put up a fight against Feliciano. But what he did do was interrogate his friend about what happened when they buried Ludwig. Alfred seemed relieved that the Chief wasn't as antagonistic as the funeral service. But he still couldn't get over it, or the idea that the Chief didn't cry once.

Matthew did feel terrible when he read Feliciano describe if it hadn't been for Kiku and Gilbert, he would've tried to be buried alongside Ludwig.

If only Ludwig hadn't been so entwined with the Trail Killer...

It only occurred to Matthew now that perhaps the reason why the Chief was so *tense* about only family being present while burying his grandson was that he *knew* the location was going to be aired to the entire world should the funeral service be a bust. Matthew chose to read that as guilt.

Roderich - Matthew couldn't help his curiosity. When he noticed that Roderich was listed recently, he had to investigate. While it seemed that Roderich and Alfred weren't frequent talkers, when they *did* talk, they had a *lot* to say. Every text that came from Roderich had an air of self-importance but at least Alfred seemed immune to feeling small, leading to some heated confrontations.

Not that every text started out as a confrontation. Alfred had sent condolences after the funeral, but followed it up with a plea for Roderich to go easy on Gilbert. In the end, Roderich didn't entirely accept Alfred's appeal but he still acted like he couldn't be bothered being cruel to Gilbert because he just wanted to put everything behind him. He said he'd forgive Gilbert for 'making a scene' and causing their Grandfather further grief because he knew Gilbert just couldn't help but act as selfishly as possible at any given time.

Matthew raised his eyebrows at that. While he knew Roderich wasn't exactly *wrong*, he did think that if any situation was exempt, it would be this one. It made him angry towards Roderich... and that anger only grew when he realised he had nowhere to release that anger now.

There were recent texts where Alfred jumped down Roderich's throat for accusing Gilbert of leaking his brother's grave. Because apparently, he had to fight every battle. That was an entertaining read as Alfred slammed the violinist for being so insensitive, pointing out how Gilbert loved and cared for Ludwig and would've never done that. Not even accidentally. Alfred seemed to be taking all his frustration out on Roderich, calling him out for being mean and taking his grief out on Gilbert while going on a whole tirade about how it's the media's fault. Alfred had nothing nice to say about snooping soulless reporters just trying to get a scoop without caring for families devastated by the Trail Killer.

No doubt that sentiment only grew after Arthur's grave being leaked..

Roderich did *not* appreciate Alfred sticking his nose into family affairs and private conversations and let him know it. Then he pulled the grief card, claiming he hadn't meant to accuse Gilbert of anything in the heat of the moment and Alfred was provoking a grieving family.

All in all, very entertaining. But left Matthew feeling hollow because it hardly felt like Roderich was dead... like the Trail Killer had been deprived of something...

Like Matthew had been his entire life.

Group chat with Steve and Zach - It seemed that it was mostly a place to regularly post memes, poke fun at each other and have a laugh. There were a few moments of seriousness when organising to hang out... or when Arthur was first killed.

The most recent texts were from tonight, all wishing Alfred goodnight and to feel better in the morning. It gave Matthew a strange sense of irony, considering how Alfred planned to ditch them. He considered if he should text the group chat to give his cousins a heads up, because even if Matthew thought they deserved it, he wanted to make things easier for himself.

But he trusted that Steve and Zach would want to sleep in until past noon. They could organise themselves because once Alfred was out of the picture, they would consider themselves home alone and Matthew would always be a ghost in his own home.

Matthew browsed through a few more chats between Alfred and his friends before quitting. He had seen enough and at this point, he wasn't even gathering intel. All he was doing was feeding the FOMO that lived deep inside him and spurring on the feeling of alienation that made up his DNA.

Matthew put Alfred's phone down with a sigh as he mentally revised what his brother had shared. He doubted he'd be getting anything more from Alfred, especially when just trying to get something coherent from him was like pulling teeth.

He just... couldn't believe it. He found himself at a loss for how he should go forward.

There was someone else, another killer. Alfred had seen him setting up a corpse to be found... Matthew had never been in touch with his own feelings. To survive he had to anticipate others and go as far as to read their minds. But his?

He felt something *strongly* about knowing there was another killer out there. Somewhere in his gut, he knew they were a serial killer, or at the very least were aspiring to be. Which could only have been inspired... by *him*. It couldn't be a coincidence.

Pride? Intrigue? *Threatened*? His feelings were *tangled*. He tried to think rationally.

Maybe they were inspired because the Trail Killer had murdered Ludwig and that had... blown up. Maybe that's why they *killed* Roderich.

Now he had some insight into how people perceived the Trail Killer. Matthew was too shocked at this outcome yet couldn't wrap his head around the fact that his kill had been stolen. The *Trail Killer* had been planning to murder Roderich, for *good reason.* Now, Matthew would miss out on that pleasure. And he didn't even know who was responsible for it.

Matthew had always liked to be in control... knowing that there was *someone* else out there? Someone else roaming the streets and doing things he didn't know about, changing the fragile status quo that Matthew had been so aware and cautious of...

Fuck, the more he thought about it, the more he realised the *ramifications*. This other killer... Matthew would have to keep tabs. If they changed the environment and Matthew wasn't on top of it-

The police would know. They *should* know this other killer *isn't him*. His signature had never been released to the public so no one else would think to add it but him. No one else knew about it besides the police and the Trail Killer. So its absence would be telling.

The stolen police radio evidently wasn't equipped with a tracking device and Matthew wished he had stored it *here*. His curiosity was killing him and he just wanted to see if there was *any* activity tonight at all, just to really confirm what he already knew. No, just so he could stay in the loop because he could've never considered this would be happening.

Matthew briefly wished he hadn't killed Ludwig because he wanted inside information *now* and he'd shot himself in the foot there. But if Ludwig *was* alive and he was still available to unknowingly trickle information to the Trail Killer, these versions of events would've never happened. There would be no other killer.

He didn't know how he felt about that. He didn't know how he felt about someone else out there, potentially claiming fame because there was no way the police could sweep *Roderich's* death under the rug, right? Surely the Chief, frustrated and tired and at the end of his rope, would want to air out his grief.

Something twisted inside him and Matthew felt the urge to break curfew and just *kill* someone to keep his throne and prevent himself from fading into obscurity - but he knew it was stupid and quickly rationalised. He needed to tread carefully.

But he was scared that what had happened all his life would happen again. He would be forgotten. He would always be 'Matthew'.

But he wasn't 'Matthew', he was the Trail Killer. And no one would forget him anytime soon. He couldn't be erased. Not *now*.

In fact, wasn't a copycat just a consequence of his *visibility*?

That brought conflict. He was angry, threatened, and flattered. He wanted to know everything about this person and at the same time he wanted them to stop. He wanted *them* in his graveyard, in place of Roderich.

As he moved Alfred's phone to lie on his bed, another thought suddenly came to him.

Until now, the crew of wannabe vigilantes had been chasing a *shadow*. Something they could see everywhere, but not something they could really *catch*.

And now?

When Alfred first started roaming the streets, Matthew had been content to let him because he had no interest in crossing paths. Besides the threat of being arrested, Alfred and his friends weren't in any real danger.

And now? Those idiots didn't know that they were hunting a very real threat.

But how was that any different from before? Matthew considered Alfred's perspective. His brother thought the threat was real this entire time and he'd always treated it as such.

Whereas last night... he hesitated. But given his demeanour and regret, he seemed adamant that he wouldn't hesitate again.

Still if this other killer came across *any* of the vigilantes... Matthew couldn't anticipate what would happen. He couldn't assume that the other killer would ignore them because they weren't someone "important".

After all, the Trail Killer had always struck when presented with the opportunity. Because he wanted to make it *big*. And evidently, considering this copycat taking a page from the Trail Killer's handbook by going right to Roderich, they did too.

Matthew took a deep breath as he rolled over and thought about the vigilantes, indulging in the delusion that they could save the day.

Alfred, Kiku, Gilbert, Ivan.

While Matthew had the fleeting thought that he wouldn't mind it if the new killer picked off Ivan for him... he would mind it. A *lot*.

The more he lingered on it, he really wasn't happy that Roderich had been killed and he wasn't there to see it.

He didn't want Alfred or Kiku dead. But Gilbert and Ivan? They were the *Trail Killer's*. He had dibs and he didn't want someone else to take that away from him. But there was nothing he could do to control if this other killer was out and about at night, if they would run into a vigilante and which one it would be.

Matthew's stomach wasn't sitting right. He sat up to lean against his bedhead as he continued to go over what he *knew*.

He knew that Alfred had a gun and was kicking himself for hesitating last night. Kiku, Gilbert and Ivan were all armed and weren't going to hesitate when they came across the 'Trail Killer' either.

But this new killer? They might. This new killer didn't know what was on the streets and if they hesitated? It would cost them either their freedom... or their life.

Matthew had another thought, one that made his heart *seize*. Matthew had targeted Ludwig due to his involvement in the case, getting in the way of what he wanted and being a risk. Roderich... had obviously been targeted for a reason. He was Ludwig's cousin and the Chief's grandson...

The Chief wasn't out of grandsons.

Gilbert...

Hopefully, this other killer found satisfaction in Roderich and didn't need to escalate anytime soon. Suddenly, it felt like there was a timer lingering above his head and he couldn't just keep *sitting there*.

Matthew considered texting Kiku with drunk typos, disguising himself as Alfred to tell Kiku he could help by keeping Gilbert home or just *safe*. Saying the Trail Killer might attack him next because he's the Chief's grandson. But he didn't know if that was too soon considering the lack of information.

Matthew forced himself to *still* and *rethink*. He could postpone this. He knew where Kiku lived and could run into him somewhere he frequented. Once it's public knowledge that Roderich had been slaughtered, he could say his concerns and urge Kiku to make sure Gilbert wasn't next.

But that could put Kiku in harm's way... Matthew would have to consider his future actions very carefully.

Matthew was really getting ahead of himself. He knew it, but thinking is what he did best and he needed to be aware and prepared for anything.

Regardless, he had to sleep before he could do anything. So he took a deep breath as he slipped under the covers and tried to sleep.

All he could do was wait until he had more information. The Chief would make an announcement soon and Matthew could navigate from there. But either way, he was safe. The park would remain untouched and daytime was as safe as before. Even if the streets at night weren't.

Only time would tell just how dangerous they were.

But Matthew didn't have the patience. As he lay there in bed, mind churning, he knew it would be a restless night.

Chapter End Notes

Also, I hate to say it, but I'm going to have to skip the next upload ;(I will be busy celebrating my birthday but I will return for the next scheduled update after that! Gotta push the plot along a little and give something angsty to chew on.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

> The next 3-4 chapters will be in the Chief's pov... there's a lot to cover that can't be conveyed through Matthew, which means he misses out on learning what you will learn...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chief Alaric Beilschmidt detested that the announcement was 'postponed'. With the world moving as fast as it was, he couldn't afford to fall behind. Not now. But when he had the weight of the world on his shoulders and barely enough resources as it was, a few days late would have to be acceptable.

Not that he could forgive himself for it.

His back was unforgiving, too. Having sat rigid at his desk for the entirety of his day, his body screamed for reprieve that would never come. If Alaric had time, he'd see a doctor about doubling his current medication so he could push himself even further. But he didn't have that luxury, and his own needs could easily be put out of his mind as he threw himself into managing the case. Now *cases*.

It was the only thing that held his attention and he didn't see that changing until *someone* was arrested. Even then, Alaric couldn't see himself *resting* until he was in the grave. Ideally, that wouldn't be for a long time as there was still so much he had left to do. If it prevented him from sleeping, God willing, it would prevent him from dying. With Lüdwig gone... there was no one else to run this city and without his competency...

Evil would win and the police wouldn't be enough.

With so much to do, Alaric demanded that he wouldn't be distracted until the very last camera had been thoroughly tested for his announcement. He couldn't afford to waste any time. The second he had said his bit, he would resume his position in this very chair, hunching over this very desk, reading the same notes and drafting the same frustrating reports. His eyes were beyond fatigued and if he kept pushing it he'd need to renew his prescription, but it was just simply another thing he could accept.

What he would *not* accept was failure. And learning as much as he could about the current situation would be his best opportunity to avoid defeat.

He sighed when there was a knock at his office door and stood, knowing it was time for his well-rehearsed piece. But when the door swung open and revealed a familiar face, Alaric couldn't stop his teeth from grinding.

If his mind wasn't already occupied during every single waking moment, he would've reminded himself to ease up before his jaw wore away to dust. But the thought never crossed his mind, so he wasn't breaking that habit anytime soon.

Ever since the interview - which had unfortunately become rendered obsolete on the very same night - Alaric had been dealing with another form of pest. One he *couldn't* arrest and make disappear, tempting as it was.

"So, ready to be on TV?" Augustus strutted in. "Oh, I miss my job sometimes. Maybe I should come out of retirement- a man needs to be kept busy after all~"

Alaric would've snapped at the man if it weren't for the brief dizzy spell that caused him to falter as he stood. It seemed he was low on iron. He blinked it away and rolled his shoulders back to hide it.

He'd been forgetting to eat recently, but he just didn't have the time. He would have to set reminders because if he deprived himself, then there was no way he was operating at his full capabilities. And with Ɛ̈ṻ̈ḍ̈Ẅi̇G̈ gone...

It was all on him.

"-so, are you ready for them to fix you up?" Augustus finished, leaning on Alaric's desk and *much* closer to his face than he realised. Alaric just blinked slowly as he processed...

Of course. *Makeup*. Great. It had been a fairly new development for whenever he appeared on broadcast, so it hadn't fully registered in his mind and had slipped. Now it made him more irritated because he didn't realise he was going to be away from his desk for longer than he initially intended and risk losing his train of thought.

"Why are you here." Alaric walked around his desk, maintaining eye contact, "My office is reserved for authorised personnel only."

Alaric had tried to keep him from the precinct but that quickly proved to be a losing battle. At the very least, he thought he'd maintain order in his office, but it seemed he couldn't do even that.

Augustus just shrugged, not taking this seriously at all. Alaric felt a spike surge through him as he just snapped, grabbing a fist of Augustus' collar and dragging him from the office while *growling* about how he was *not welcome*.

Yet when Alaric slammed his office door behind them as he pushed the overstepping pest away from him... Augustus didn't look at him with *contempt* or anything that could be regarded as a challenge...

Nothing that was like a lifetime ago.

Even while heaving for breath, Augustus looked *at* him... and saw past everything Chief Beilschmidt tried to be and uphold... and looked at him with *pity*.

It made Alaric sick. But he could be the bigger person.

"Leave. You'll be informed if your assistance is necessary," Alaric rolled his shoulders again and walked away.

He heard footsteps behind him.

"Oh, I think my assistance is necessary..." Augustus chuckled, but it was flat and reluctant. "I think you could at least use the company, come on-"

"I'm busy, the last thing I need is *company*," Alaric pressed the elevator button. He'd take the stairs, but after sitting for so long, he didn't want to test his knees. Especially not with company, whom he resigned himself to sharing an uncomfortable elevator ride with.

"Well, you're not busy now," Augustus stepped into the elevator. At least he had a look of guilt for the tension he was creating.

"I'm making a very important statement," Alaric hit the lobby button with more force than necessary. "One that will unfortunately affect the lives of many people."

"I know, but you've still got to get glammed up for the camera! There's not much you can do then and trust me, I know from experience that it's better to have someone around when you're being worked on."

Alaric just grunted in annoyance and stepped out of the elevator. He could've used that time to entertain his thoughts and rearrange information in his mind, but it seemed he couldn't even have *that*.

"Come on," Augustus put an *unwelcome* arm around Alaric, "I just wanted to check in on how you're doing-"

Alaric shoved that arm off him, uncaring if they were already in the lobby and the makeup crew was waiting for him.

"...I'll take that as not good."

Alaric ignored him and sat in his designated chair, just waiting to get this over and done with. Unfortunately, the makeup was necessary. While he was in the best health he could be... the bar for 'best health' had been slowly lowering for months before plummeting in the past few weeks. But that wasn't something he was going to show the public. So the makeup would make him look as intimidating as possible and less like the old man he was feeling like more with each passing day.

He balled his hands, his nails digging into his skin as he watched Augustus grab a chair and bring it alongside Alaric's. The Chief adjusted his jaw and kept his eyes straight ahead. While he wanted to demand that this pest leave or that *someone* kick him out, Alaric wasn't oblivious to how Augustus lit up any room he walked into and built instant rapport with whoever he conversed with. It was obvious he had spoken with the news crew before being let into the precinct. The crew members nodded and smiled at him upon his return and didn't bat an eye as he moved a chair... to sit right next to the Chief.

Alaric couldn't do much. Everyone was happy to have Augustus around and Alaric didn't want to sabotage any relationships or connections now.

Nor did he really have the energy. After sitting in his office for so long, ruminating in his own head, he really didn't have it in him to speak when it wasn't necessary.

"Look, I just want to give you my sympathies," Augustus sighed, leaning on the Chief's armrest. "When Lovino... well, I couldn't keep it together. I commend you for being able to at least pretend you can."

"*I am*." Alaric kept his eyes closed while the makeup was applied. At least then he'd be giving his eyes a rest.

And for the record, he *was* keeping it together. It wouldn't benefit Roderich otherwise.

Augustus sighed again. After a moment of silence, Alaric realised his *acquaintance* was at a loss for words.

"I don't know what I'd do..." Augustus spoke slowly, with uncertainty, "If I were you and... I had all this weight on my shoulders. I know we haven't always seen eye to eye and I've tried my best in the past to rectify that but... I'm worried for you. I don't want grief to crush you."

Alaric really should've just kicked Augustus out.

"I won't allow it to," Alaric stated before sighing. "I turn it into motivation."

"Oh, of course, I'd hate to have your job," Augustus quickly followed up with a supportive chuckle. "I'll be here to help you in any way I can! Just say the word."

Alaric grunted in reply and wondered how long the makeup was going to take. All he had to do was endure an unnecessary, one sided conversation while having his makeup done and then he'd be able to shake Augustus off to give his statement before retreating to his office. Everything until then was just an obstacle.

Just when he thought Augustus had given up on small talk, the man opened his mouth again.

"I just feel terrible for our grandkids... all those kids have been through so much... I just want the best for them and..." Augustus sighed deeply and regretfully. "I'm going to see Feli today. I just need to give my boy a hug."

Alaric sucked in an intake of breath with the need to sigh, but he refrained. The only thought that crossed his mind was 'No wonder that boy turned out like *that*.' He held back his opinion about the excessive doting. The last thing he wanted to do was engage and encourage a conversation.

"Ah, maybe I should stay the night with him, make him some pasta like I used to when he was small," Augustus continued before leaning more into Alaric's space. "Hey, how's Gilbert doing? It's just one thing after another and I can only imagine... well, how's he holding up? Last time I saw him-"

"Do not discuss sensitive details privy of the investigation, lest you hinder it. If you can't remain professional, I will have you removed." There was nothing Alaric could say to prevent this thorn in his side from worming into the building, but there were things he could do. He just hoped it didn't come to that.

Augustus made a noise of disbelief as if he really didn't believe Alaric's words. Then he cleared his throat.

"Well, uh, I'll have to shop for the pasta supplies and since I'm there I might as well get the kids a treat," Augusted continued like he didn't hear Alaric, but there was a hesitant waver in his voice. "If anything will cheer my boy up, it'll be a treat from Grandpa. Can you tell me what Gilbert likes? I'll pick him up a treat. Antonio, too. Oh, these poor kids have been going through hell and-"

Alaric resigned himself to participating in this dismally redundant discussion because it seemed like there was no alternative. He couldn't think of a worse way to spend his time. His mental energy should've been directed towards considering how to handle his recently deceased grandson - a task

no grandparent should have to do once, let alone *twice*. There were funeral considerations *and* public relations *and* deceased estate to sort through, tasks that fell solely on him now without Ludwig... And all made more complicated as it was part of an ongoing murder investigation.

And then there was the very nature of Roderich's death himself. How could the Chief of Police *not* blame himself? Due to the very nature of their relations... Roderich was murdered because *clearly* Alaric wasn't intimidating *enough*. Ludwig's murder had just been the *start*.

"I can't tell you what Gilbert likes, but I'm sure anything with sugar will suffice," Alaric sighed. He didn't exactly approve of his grandson having sugar, but there was nothing he could say against it. "Those kids will be fine."

While Gilbert may not have been as blessed with same common sense Ludwig had, Alaric had still raised him all the same. He was strong and didn't need to be fussed over. The last thing he needed was to become a wimpy coward who relied on the strong, much like how Ludwig had become stretched thin while bearing the brunt of an excessive workload *and* managing an exhausting home life...

The same sentiment applied to the Chief. He didn't need to be fussed over. Having his makeup done was really getting on his nerves as the foreign texture left his face *crawling*.

"Well, I just had a better idea! I should take them to the shops instead! It would get them out of the house and I'll just buy them whatever they like," Augustus sounded proud, but Alaric kept his eyes closed so he wouldn't see the man's face. "Come on, talk to me. Have you even seen Gilbert since you had to tell him...? I know you're busy, but aren't you worried?"

"No. I haven't seen him and I don't have to worry about him. I made sure of it."

"Right... what do you mean by that?" Augustus chuckled and shifted closer. "So you have checked in on them? I'd be worried shitless if I was you... I don't know how you can ignore the urge to just smother them!"

Alaric didn't mention that he avoided that urge easily because he didn't even have the time to linger on it. As far as he was concerned, he didn't have that urge and he was thankful for it. Especially when he saw how it *puppeted* Augustus.

"I've done the best I can to manage Gilbert, considering the circumstances," Alaric paused as he considered what he should reveal. Augustus already knew more than he would've liked, considering the pest was lingering around the station the morning after Roderich's murder.

Alaric didn't like it then, but Augustus at least had the respect to stay out of the way and not badger him with pity. The Chief had enough on his plate and having Gilbert picked up so he could break the news in person was already challenging enough. A decision he questioned whether or not it was the right one to make when he had to keep his grandson in custody for the majority of the day, just so he could process everything under surveillance.

Alaric knew deep down it was the right choice to make. One that he should've made when Ludwig had died. Hearing about Gilbert's reaction to that after the matter...

He knew Gilbert cherished Ludwig and thought the world of him. Looked up to him in a way that was unbecoming of an older brother but undeniably understanding, considering how much Ludwig

had achieved. Alaric really should've anticipated that outcome and intervened before Gilbert humiliated himself by breaking down. He knew he should've done something to curb it but he wouldn't make that same mistake twice. By bringing him in, he would be in a safe environment where he could be observed and wouldn't be a danger to himself or others.

"However, there is something you should know," Alaric sighed, his voice equally authoritative and pleading. "Something that you can *not* repeat as it contains details pertaining to the investigation."

Augustus immediately nodded and leaned in, while Alaric shot a glare to the makeup artist with a wordless warning to keep details confidential. The artist cowered and the Chief knew he had been successful with his commend. That was easy, but what Alaric quickly found himself struggling with was the follow-up.

There was no easy way to explain it besides stating it. That's how he had broken Ròdeřich̆'s death to Gilbert... which had evidently not been the best method considering his grandson's volatile emotions. Alaric didn't say it, but he had been grateful for Augustus' presence that day. Leaving Augustus to manage Gilbert let the Chief get back to the case and direct his thoughts back to something *productive*.

"Gilbert was brought into the precinct the following day. I expect he would still be feeling... " Alaric was too tired to find a sensitive or eloquent way to put it. "Unstable."

"Unstable is putting it lightly. But considering the situation I can't blame him at all..." Augustus smiled sympathetically. "Did he get worse? I guess you just wanted to keep an eye on him, right? Without taking too much away from the case, surely?"

"No."

"Then why'd you bring him in? He didn't have another episode, did he? It must've been bad if his friends couldn't look after him..."

"He did. But that's not why I brought him in." Alaric felt his breath intake again to sigh, but he once again suppressed it. "Roderich's killer sent him a letter."

"*What*?" Augustus' voice was strained. "He- *what makes you say that?*"

"The details are privy only to those working the case," Alaric could feel a vein twitching in his forehead at being questioned. He sighed to release the tension and shifted in his seat. He was only telling Augustus because if he was going to see those kids, he needed context for whatever he found. Besides, there was a high probability that those kids would spill anyway. If Alaric was a betting man, he'd say it was most likely that Feliciano broke the NDA for something as trivial as gossiping with his grandfather. At least by having one *semi*-responsible adult in the know, Augustus would be able to keep them silent.

"I've been over the contents of that letter and I'm not mistaken," Alaric briefly explained. It was always taxing to speak to someone who wasn't wired to be practical like he was. "It definitely set Gilbert back, so be prepared to face him."

Augustus was silent for a moment and Alaric took the moment as a reprieve.

Having Gilbert in the precinct two days in a row wasn't exactly ideal, but no one could've guessed that things would turn out how they did.

Chapter End Notes

The corrupted text is meant to symbolise grief but I might drop it for the next chapters because it looks a little goofy lol

ASingularCrystaRose (Ao3) made something inspired by this fic on tiktok (@yamisodaa)! Check it out here --> https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZT6ApRnQ6/

For anyone nosy about my birthday, I had a talent show birthday party where I asked all my friends to do something interesting for my entertainment. One of my friends dressed up in a cat in the hat costume and held a weird fish mask while quoting Hamlet. I also planned awards so that friend got the funniest outfit certificate ahaha

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

> This chapter has been intensively edited so if it doesn't feel right, that's why. But I wanted to post it in time so here you go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alaric had barely slept that night. Every time he closed his eyes...
he was in that cold room, straining his eyes to see his grandson's corpse lying on the cold steel table with a sheet draped over everything but his face.

The sheet hid nothing. When Alaric was finally able to rip his eyes away from Roderich's vacant expression, he'd see the way the sheet draped and clung to the stiff body unnaturally... Alaric *knew* what was hidden under there. It left him burning with righteous fury.

Reminding himself to be patient only made him more frustrated, but luckily, professionalism was second nature. That was the only way he had managed to break the news to Gilbert.

He didn't expect to bring Gilbert in the very day after that.

That morning had passed in a blur, something he'd contribute to a lack of sleep and an overbearing workload. Chief Beilschmidt had arrived at the precinct just to continue the same work he'd been forced to roll out preemptively - an *initiative*. One hastily pulled together shortly after Ludwig's death. Given the recent development, it was more important than ever for him to set things in motion and try to get ahead of the game. No matter what the cost...

Alaric lowered himself in his chair, gripping the arm rests with tensed hands as it creaked with a noise that rivalled his knees. With a sigh he shuffled the towering stack of paperwork on his desk.

Regarding Roderich and the new Copycat Killer's case, he had done all he could for now. It was difficult but he knew it wouldn't do him any good to revise it, especially when he already had it memorised back to front and his eyes were weaping. There wasn't anything he could do, not while he was still waiting on the full autopsy report. If he wasn't concerned about disturbing the lab staff, he'd phone again asking for an update for the second time that hour.

But because he was a pragmatic man, he knew that his current desire to obsess on one aspect was not ideal. Not when there were other things to work on and would be costly to overlook. It pained him but he needed to tend to the ongoing matters that would benefit both the Trail Killer and Copycat investigations.

Like his ambitious initiative.

With Ludwig's death and the current climate becoming near *suffocating*, the need for a larger workforce became *very* apparent. Chief Beilschmidt would've liked to utilise the initiative under different circumstances - *with* Ludwig being alive and managing it. But he didn't let the thought

linger. No matter how it would've been more *ideal* for Ludwig to oversee it and turn it into an operation that hit two birds with one stone.

Because Alaric didn't have the capacity to set up a situation to draw out the Trail Killer. Not now. Not when he was a failure of a grandfather and failing to excel as the Chief.

But that was something he was determined to turn around.

The initiative was a simple program. The idea was to recruit individuals from similar professions to policing and give them intensive training to join the police force as soon as possible. It was strictly on a need-to-know basis and Alaric was intent on keeping it quiet. The last thing he needed was for it to become common knowledge and lose face with the public. Luckily the program had been a complete success. An NDA went a long way and the Chief was thankful that throughout everything, the precinct retained strong lawyers. A team that was only growing with new firms volunteering nearly every day.

It had been thankfully simple to get the initiative in motion. An offer had been sent to all major adjacent professions and when presented with the opportunity, many applied. Now all of those applications sat in a heavy crate by his desk. Every application had been approved and every individual signed an NDA. *And* every application had been combed through by a team of officers to ensure that not one raised any red flags for fitting the profile of the Trail Killer.

Which was great, and also a great pity. While few things were *simple*, nothing came *easy*. If the Trail Killer had applied, it would've finally put an end to his reign of terror.

The odds had been too low anyway, knowing the Trail Killer's profile. If only Ludwig were here, perhaps the initiative could've been adapted to reach the Trail Killer...

Too bad. Besides, the Trail Killer was hardly his biggest concern. This current situation wasn't something he could've imagined unfolding... yet he knew he shouldn't be surprised. With the Trail Killer being so sensationalised... of course it produced a copycat.

Alaric was *furious* with himself that he didn't see it coming.

Once the Copycat's profile was finalised... he'd make sure the entire precinct was familiar with it and have the entire crate sifted through thoroughly, *just* to ensure that the Copycat Killer hadn't been drawn to one of the professions that so closely overlapped with police work.

That profile was the Chief's highest priority. He had stacks of notes and a detailed draft already, but he was just waiting on the *full* autopsy to finalise it...

He pushed the autopsy out of his mind, along with images of the sterile room with burning fluorescent lights and a foreboding white sheet. Alaric sighed and picked up the first application from the crate. While he desperately needed additions to the police force, the investigative task force could use anyone who stood out and Alaric wanted to see for himself what assets were available.

He had skimmed through a few applications when his phone rang. His *personal* one.

Only a select few people would call it, but Alaric could only think of *one* who would disregard the Chief's unavailability during typical work hours.

Gilbert.

Alaric declined the call immediately before muting the number to 'repeat call'. As much as he wanted to temporarily block Gilbert's number, Alaric reasoned his grandson should be able to reach him if he needed. Even though the Chief seriously doubted that Gilbert was calling for something Alaric would find worth wasting his time.

With a sigh, he returned his attention to the application... when the device rang again. He grunted out a noise of annoyance-

It was an unknown number.

The irritation only grew stronger. Obviously, his personal number had been pawned off and once again, he could only think of a select few who would be inconsiderate and foolish enough to do so.

Alaric answered the phone, resigned to having to sort yet *another* obligation obstructing his work.

"Chief Beilschmidt speaking. Who is this."

"Hi! Sorry to call like this, I know you're very busy but it's very important and Gilbert's call didn't go through so I thought I'd try calling from my phone..."

It took him a moment to place the voice before Alaric identified it as Gilbert's remaining best friend, Antonio.

"Why are you calling?" Alaric wordlessly demanded Antonio stop rambling. Gilbert was definitely responsible for this but Alaric decided he'd wait to hear it out before lashing out at his grandson.

"Uh, well," Antonio's voice was wavering with nerves. "We got a letter today and, well, we think it was written by the Trail Killer."

Alaric sat up straight as his jaw tightened. His teeth started to grind when after some back and forth, Antonio still wasn't articulating himself effectively and struggling to give the key details Alaric needed.

"Do you still have the letter?"

"*Err*, yes, Gilbert has it-"

"Take it off him. We cannot have potential evidence damaged," Alaric commanded. "Use a tissue to handle the letter and do *not* touch it more than necessary. I assume you're home, I'll have someone retrieve you and bring you to the station."

Alaric hung up and sighed deeply. Grabbing the landline sitting on his desk, he promptly organised their collection before sitting back in his seat and pressing a hand to his forehead.

He didn't know what to think of it. He wanted to dismiss it and assume it was someone trying to claim their 15 minutes of fame, but given the evidence found at Roderich's crime scene...

It was plausible.

He knew for a fact this wasn't the Trail Killer. The Trail Killer had never had an interest in making contact, so why start now?

Alaric needed to see the letter before he made any assessments on who was really behind this stunt...

· · — ⋆ · ✶ · ⋆ — · ·

It was immediately obvious that, regardless of the validity of the letter, Gilbert was a wreck. His face was twisted with rage and grief. His cheeks burned bright red as tears ran down them and blood stained, swollen, bitten lips. Feliciano was pressed right against his side, holding tight to his arm which brutally reminded the Chief of Ludwig-

Alaric stifled it. No matter how uncanny the sight was as the Italian clung to the wrong brother, it was reality.

Antonio and Feliciano were both anxious, concerned and confused. Busying themselves with trying to manage Gilbert and explain their limited knowledge to the police. From their demeanour, Alaric quickly concluded that neither of them knew about Roderich... much to his surprise. He expected Gilbert to have told them everything by now. Clearly, he mischaracterised his grandson.

Antonio and Feliciano kept glancing at the Chief, but whenever Alaric glanced at Gilbert, his grandson was adamantly staring at the ground. It made him want to sigh, but he acknowledged that in the very least, Gilbert was trying to contain himself. Still, the tension Gilbert was creating was palpable and Alaric knew he had to break it. He needed to get through this so he could determine just what he was dealing with.

Alaric raised a hand to silence the group, allowing him a moment to breathe. Putting on a pair of gloves, he took the evidence from Antonio - an envelope and a piece of paper - presumably the letter.

As he inspected it Antonio began to ramble in what he likely thought was helpful confirmation that this was indeed the letter. Alaric just tuned him out as his eyes narrowed and never moved focus.

The envelope was standard and could be purchased just about anywhere. That was handwritten, which was something he could send to analysis. Everything would have to be checked for DNA and fingerprints regardless and Alaric just hoped this Copycat killer wasn't as thorough as the Trail Killer...

Not that he knew this was the work of *the Copycat* yet.

There was no return address on the envelope, and the stamps were generic. There was only Gilbert's name and his address, confirming this was targeted.

I know youve been feeling like shit for a while so just watch the news I think it'll cheer you up. Youre welcome ;)

At least it was decisive. From the choice of the font alone, Alaric knew he could conclude this *wasn't* some degenerate loser trying to feel powerful by claiming to be someone they're not. The silver lining was the profile would certainly be more extensive than he imagined, even if this act didn't bode well.

Too bad he couldn't get his hands on this letter *before* his grandson read it. The taunting was no doubt eating Gilbert alive.

Just like him... his chest was burning and his jaw was locked and suddenly he was standing in front of Roderich, holding the note found with him covered in blood and saliva yet placed with more care than his grandson's corpse.

At this rate, the announcement was going to be *postponed* and Alaric could feel the pressure *crushing* him.

"Take this away." Alaric held out the evidence to one of the officers on standby. "I want it checked for everything and submitted as evidence by lunchtime."

Interviewing the witnesses was fairly straightforward. He began with Antonio, leaving Feliciano to calm Gilbert in the hallway. Having decided to interview Gilbert last, it would give his grandson enough time to find the resolve to pull himself together. It was a matter of practicality and a small kindness, though he doubted his grandson would see it as such.

Holding the interviews in the breakroom wasn't ideal, but every available room in the precinct would be occupied for the foreseeable future as *thousands* were planned to be interviewed regarding Roderich's murder. Alaric already knew that the activity levels in the building would leave his head aching by the end of the day, but it was just another thing he'd have to endure.

Antonio sat nervously at the round table, doing his best to be professional even though it was apparent he couldn't figure out where to put his hands. Alaric didn't address the nerves as he made the boy recount everything that had transpired in explicit detail. It took a couple of follow up questions to get a whole picture of that morning, but Alaric was thankful for Antonio's cooperation.

The story: A postman had knocked with a delivery that Gilbert had to sign for. That didn't raise any suspicions until they saw it was a letter. Being addressed to him, he opened it... only to freak out and spiral. Antonio and Feliciano had no idea what it was about, neither of them read the letter as Gilbert kept it from them. But from his panicked rambles they knew it was from the Trail Killer. Antonio convinced Gilbert he needed to hand the evidence over to the police and when Alaric didn't pick up, Gilbert demanded Antonio call from his phone.

Next to interview was Feliciano. The Italian took longer to retrieve than he would've liked, but Alaric had expected he would be hard to pry away from Gilbert. At least it gave him time to think.

There was a possibility they would receive more letters in the future... Alaric would have to give his grandson a talking to about not opening them. But if he did, and it was highly likely his grandson would go against his instructions... Alaric had to consider releasing integral information to a select few people...

He reasoned that without the context of the case, he would be in this exact position anyway and a necessary courtesy.

Feliciano wasn't that difficult to talk to. He was upset and kept asking about Gilbert while pleading with the Chief, all of which he ignored as he pushed Feliciano back in the right direction of backing up Antonio's version of events. At least their heightened emotions weren't causing them to misrepresent reality.

Finally, Alaric sent Feliciano from the room and braced himself for who would come in next.

Gilbert entered the room and silently shut the door behind him. He walked over to the chair opposite the Chief, sitting with folded hands and looked Alaric in the eye without a hint of emotion on his face. It was... uncanny. But Alaric didn't linger on that thought, not when he was in a professional setting and had a job to do.

Gilbert confirmed the story with ease, giving up relevant information with very little prompting. It left Alaric with the feeling that maybe Gilbert was capable of so much more than what he was and all Alaric could think of was Ludwig. But all too soon, Gilbert was clearing his throat and glancing down, breaking the illusion.

"So, was the letter really from him?"

Alaric thought about it for a moment.

"Do you have anything else to tell me?"

"That's all I know," Gilbert balled his hands. "May I go?"

"You may," Alaric stated. "However, I need you to send Antonio and Feliciano in."

"*Was*?! Why?" Gilbert dropped his reserved demeanour as his eyes flashed intensely at Alaric.

"I need to inform them of Roderich's passing," Alaric stated, unaffected.

Gilbert's demeanour faltered and instead of replying he stood and left. Just when Alaric sighed and made to stand, expecting to have to fetch the others himself, he heard Gilbert's voice,

"He wants you guys, good luck- come on, let's not waste more time at this shithole."

Alaric withheld a sigh at his grandson's disrespect, though he agreed on the sentiment about wasting time. But he was going to see this through.

He didn't expect to see all three walk back in and sit down, but he had given Gilbert his option to leave so it was a choice he would have to live with.

"I'll keep this brief. First of all, should you receive any more letters it is imperitive that you do *not* open them and contact me *immediately*."

Everyone nodded or made a noise of agreement. Alaric continued.

"I cannot indulge the details but there is something I must tell you. I understand it is upsetting in nature but as it pertains to the interest of an ongoing case, I am going to ask you to keep this information confidential."

More agreement. Alaric took a moment to think about his delivery. While he had learnt yesterday that blunt wasn't always best... he didn't know anything else. And being a group, they had each

other and could keep themselves in check.

"Roderich Edelstein has passed away."

Alaric could see the moment everyone recoiled. Even Gilbert, who already knew, sunk into his chair and scrunched up his face.

Feliciano began warbling with progressive despair before turning to Gilbert and clinging to him. Antonio brought his hands to his face, knocking his chair over as he abruptly stood and bolted from the room.

Alaric knew he only did what he had to, though he wished he didn't. Wordlessly, he scanned the room before sliding a box of tissues over to Gilbert and Feliciano. He didn't know how to read the look Gilbert gave him as he took the box to pass to the Italian.

Alaric just wanted to leave. His presence was redundant here and his time was better used in his office. He didn't know how to manage others emotions but he *did* know how to deduce characteristics from crimes and this letter sent to gloat was actually a very good thing for the case.

Just as he stood to announce his departure and have his grandson sent home, Antonio came back in. Instantly, Feliciano was tripping over himself to pull Antonio into a hug and blabbering something that was impossible to make out through his emotional tone and accent. Despite the devastated expression on his face, Antonio began to soothe Feliciano while glancing over at Gilbert.

"I'm sorry for leaving amigo, you know me and Roderich go way back..." Antonio shuddered but he shoved it down, accepting tissues when Gilbert forced them into his hand. "I'm really sorry for your loss... is this what you couldn't tell me yesterday?"

After a glance between Antonio and the Chief, Gilbert just nodded. Alaric knew his grandson didn't want to be here so he cleared his throat.

"You may stay here for as long as you need. I'll have an officer ready to escort you home."

Alaric didn't need a response, instead just leaving the room and shutting the door. After a brief word to the waiting officer, Alaric was navigating the halls as he marched straight for his office. He had a lot to think over and he didn't want to waste any time.

Whoever delivered that envelope needed to be identified and investigated. There was a possibility that the envelope had never made it into the post and whoever delivered it was just the killer in disguise, getting off by hand delivering devastation.

But given the stamps on the envelope, it was possible it was posted. It was possible the Copycat worked in the system, allowing him to hand deliver it and hide the letter's origins...

No, Alaric was getting ahead of himself. Without a profile, he had no idea how elaborate this killer was, making him think of the worst possible scenario. Besides, the postal worker's demeanour wasn't described as inappropriate and likely just a regular worker.

Still, hunting the origins of that letter and questioning the workers would be a start. Alaric really needed to complete the new workforce initiative and have new officers trained up and ready to intergrate into the team. It was going to be necessary now with *two* serial killers on the loose. One who was a complete mystery and one who was eager to *torment* his victims.

His chair groaned as he shut himself in his office and sifted through papers again, yet he couldn't ignore the way the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

This new development was extremely concerning. How could Alaric *not* fear the implications? This Copycat Killer was unhinged and *not* to be underestimated.

Chapter End Notes

Someone we know/know of has been recruited through this initiative and therefore will get some relevance in the future... I haven't got to slip it in earlier but it will be later. Hopefully it'll set some fun dynamics later and depending on how much focus I have I could really deepen it for maximum angst >:) but we'll see just how the extent of the role will unfold.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Short and to the point 😈

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alaric was pulled from his thoughts when he heard the make-up artist muttering about almost being done, and he realised he was hearing something else. Laboured breathing. Alaric's eyes flew open when someone clutched onto his arm and he saw Augustus' wide eyes staring into his.

"*He knows where they live*," Augustus' breath hitched, voice barely audible. "*We've got to get them out of there-!*"

"*Augustus*," Alaric withheld a wince as nails dug into tense flesh. Clearly, he miscalculated by sharing this. "It's been dealt with. I've stationed more officers in the area and upgraded their residential security. I will not allow anyone else to be victimised. Regardless, the intention of the letter was only to seek attention."

Augustus sighed in relief, his face weary as his body sagged and his arm fell away from Alaric's.

"Oh... but still... I bet they felt so *scared*. They're just *kids*! Oh, my poor *Feli*... he needs his Grandpa... his *Nonno*..."

Augustus' sad rambling was cut off as the make-up artist *finally* stepped away, allowing Alaric to breathe again and stand with a grunt. His vision temporarily swam but when it cleared, he turned to his acquaintance.

"If you want to help, stay out of the way so I can do my job," he stated, pressing his eyes shut firmly as he reoriented himself. "I need to give this statement."

"You know what?" Augustus stood too, his smile strained. "You don't have to worry. I'm going to go look after my grandchildren."

Alaric's eyebrows furrowed as Augustus put a firm hand on his shoulder. "I'll make sure to give Gil a big hug since you're preoccupied. Hopefully one day you can give him once yourself, once you've caught the monsters that haunt their dreams."

Something about the man's tone didn't sit well with Alaric but he chose to overlook it, giving a short nod before walking away. He didn't have the luxury to linger. At least Augustus ultimately understood that it was up to Alaric to catch the 'monsters', as he so brutally put it. And that started with getting ahead of the narrative with this announcement.

"Oh, and Chief," Augustus turned on his heel, face serious. Alaric paused and looked over his shoulder, hoping this would be quick. "You're too young to be having heart problems."

Before he could demand that Augustus elaborate, the man left the precinct and Alaric was being waved over by the camera crew. Alaric internally sighed, he needed to focus and move his piece on the chessboard.

Making his way to the podium, the familiar flashes of cameras and pushiness of journalists came into view. Their volume ached and he knew he had to make this quick before it brought on a headache. He took a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it to sit on the podium as he held his hand to silence everyone. After a brief glance over the note, Chief Beilschmidt finally looked up and addressed the crowd with a commanding gaze.

"Good afternoon. I have no time for pleasantries and will get straight to the point. I have a few serious matters to discuss and I will do so chronologically."

"The first matter that I would like to address occurred during the early hours of the 25th," He loosened his jaw and withheld a sigh as he remembered the events the night *before* Roderich's death. How he never thought it was the worst kind of sadistic foreshadowing. "There had indeed been a body."

Hopefully, backtracking wouldn't cause any problems. Not when he had worked so hard to suppress that information from the public.

But it was what it was, and he knew what he had to do.

"We were led to believe that due to the savage and appalling nature of the murder, we were looking at an isolated incident irrelevant to the ongoing Trail Killer case. However, upon further inspection and newfound evidence, we believe that the murder was unrecognisable as the Trail Killer's work due to the rapid escalation after a period of inactivity. It is to my utmost regret that I must retract my earlier statement about the Trail Killer's involvement."

It was fortunate that he had the media trained not to bark their questions at him like the vultures they were. Had it been anyone else, they would. Good thing his influence and intimidation spared him a headache or worse, *migraine,* would only hinder his work.

Still, he could see everything in their eyes as the crowd of reporters and media agents leaned in, and Alaric felt like he was surrounded.

"Unfortunately, I was right to have the curfew. The Trail Killer is still a threat and I underestimated him."

Alaric rested his hands on the podium, over the paperwork with the notes he knew back to front because he had devised this strategy.

Now he had to deliver it. He prepared himself as his eyes scanned through the crowd. The publicity Roderich would get would be a constant reminder that he was gone and Alaric had failed him... but it had to be done. He had to move his pieces to prevent a checkmate.

This was the only move he could take without losing. He had to inform the people of the evil taking place in the city, but he could *not*, under any circumstances, *sensationalise* and give this new aspiring villain what he wanted.

This was all he could do and *hope* it worked in his favour. Only a select few would know the truth. The police, this new killer, and of course the Trail Killer himself. Neither Gilbert nor Augustus

knew any better either and it would stay that way.

Ludwig would've approved... had he been here.

"The following night, during the late hours of the 25th..." Alaric refrained from clearing his throat, hands tensing on the podium. "The Trail Killer broke into Roderich Edelstein's residence."

The effect was immediate as the crowd reacted in fear and morbid curiosity. Alaric hated to sensationalise his grandson's murder but he had to do what it took to win. This *copycat killer* wanted fame. Alaric could see that much.

"He was subject to torture before his life was taken." Alaric didn't want to see the media circus after this announcement. "He was then left to be discovered by our task force."

The crowd was itching for details, questions on the tips of their tongues and it infuriated Alaric. But he remained professional.

"Being the grandson to the Chief of police," Alaric paused to let the crowd realise the ramifications of this loss, "this is a personal attack and we will utilise every measure available to make sure this killer is brought to justice."

How many times had he parroted that phrase? Alaric didn't know, but he knew every time he said it, it came out with increasingly vicious intensity.

Because he would not back down. And this was just another counter move that would hopefully help him claw his way towards results. Only the police and Trail Killer would know this misidentification of Roderich's murderer was no accident. The new killer didn't know about the Trail Killer's signature... and would just assume the police made a mistake. One he might set out to rectify... risking it all and giving the police more information with every move he made to try and make a name for himself.

"Information about the extended curfew can be found on the police and local news websites. Compliance is mandatory and any suspicious activity is to be reported immediately. Thank you."

Alaric hated how out of hand this had become. But he would never stop. He would always find a way to counter and conquer.

The moment he stepped away from the podium the crowd began to roar. Alaric kept each step purposeful as he stepped back into the precinct, hearing the crowd behind him getting louder, pleading for more details. The moment Alaric was inside the building officers secured the entrance to hold back the uproar of journalists.

Alaric knew it was an intense scene... one that would inspire intense emotions from the Copycat should the cameras still be rolling. He just hoped that in order to subdue one killer, he didn't miscalculate with the other. This was how the Copycat came to be to begin with...

Hopefully the Trail Killer remained dormant even after this spectacle, but Alaric felt his chest constrict because he *knew* he couldn't guarantee it.

But he did what he had to, his hand had been forced. He had to inform the public without appearing like the police were lying but he couldn't tell the whole truth.

He took the elevator back to his office and the moment the doors shut he leaned on the wall, dragging a hand down his face as moisture clung to his strained eyes.

Alaric had to focus on what he could control and organise his top priorities. Which was finishing the profile and mass-distributing it. Then and only then would he comb through the initiative recruits and hand-select anyone worth promoting to the investigative team. He needed more people working *on* the case. Someone had to resume Ludwig's role...

Depending on how things unravel in the future... Alaric would have to turn the media into his pawns once again and have the journalists convey certain information to turn the tide in his favour. Even without the complete Copycat profile, Alaric knew the Copycat was attention-driven. The taunting letter to Gilbert highlighted that alone and would be a major aspect of the profile.

At least Alaric thought of a use for Augustus, since the man had been so adamant about helping ever since that redundant interview. Augustus came with celebrity endorsement... if Alaric wanted the public to feel a certain way about something without it being overtly pushed by the police.... He mentally jotted it down as another weapon in his arsenal.

Given what he was up against, he was going to need all the firepower he could.

Chapter End Notes

WhimsicalSexton on Ao3 made a playlist inspired by this fic! Check it out here --> https://open.spotify.com/playlist/10RoPe6BBbYuyDefOnZQeV?si=QWQa3hbPQgqYs6jmMyQwWg

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

> Y'all are in for a treat >:) I had these autopsy reports written up since like February... yikes. Oh well, at least I was prepared. Hope y'all can read my handwriting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> He had already gone through this pile numerous times, but with nothing but obsession fueling him, he was determined to go through it again until he had memorised *every detail*. No matter how trivial, anything could lead to a breakthrough in the case. So without any hesitation, he picked up the documents describing the night Roderich died. Alaric pushed his reading glasses further up his face and squinted as he focused on the papers.

Coroner Investigation Report

Case number: S-1042021

Coroner/Deputy: [illegible] Time of Arrival: 12:20 am

Date of Call: Oct 26 Suspected Cause:

Time of Call: 11:52 pm ☐ Natural ☐ Accident ☐ Pending

Person Calling: [illegible]

Police department: CBD ☐ Suicide ☒ Homicide ☐ Undetermined

Decedent Information

First name: Roderich Last name: Edelstein ☒ Male ☐ Female

Address: [illegible] Surviving spouse: N/A

Age: 25 Mother' Maiden Name: Beilschmidt

Date of Birth: Oct 26 Father's Name: Edelstein

Birth place: Vienna Education: 4 yrs college/tech school

Height: 177cm / 5.10 Employment: Employed

Weight: — Marital status: Unmarried

Eyes: Violet Race: White Ethnicity: European

Hair: Dark brown ☐ Pregnant ☐ Homeless ☐ Veteran

Next of Kin

Notified by: CBD Name: Ularic Beilschmidt Relationship: Grandfather

Date notified: Oct 27 Address: [illegible]

Time notified: 12:25 am Phone number: [illegible]

Incident Information

Death Date: Oct 26 Injury Date: Oct 26

Death Time: 22:50 pm Injury Time: 22:20 pm

Place of death: Residence Place of injury: Residence

	Date:	Time:	Location:
Last seen alive:	Oct 26	18:47 pm	Wienerwald bäckerei
Death discovered:	Oct 26	11:51 pm	Residence

Found dead by: Police patrol Address: [illegible]

Last seen alive by: Bakery clerks Address: [illegible]

Witness to injury, illness or death: None

Weather: N/A Activity: Occurred during curfew

Position of body: Reconstructed innocuously to sit propped outside residence

Livor: Visible at 11:52 pm

Rigor: Observed during coroner examination ☐ Consistant with position No.

☐ Clothed ☒ Partially clothed ☐ Unclothed

Distinguishing marks: None

Body temperature: 34°C/93.2°F at 12:33 am Body decomposition: Not observed at time of arrival

Cause of death: [illegible] Wound Location:

A) ~~Exsanguination~~ Massive internal organ failure (Immediate cause)

B) External hemorrage from loss of limbs (Due to or as consequence of)

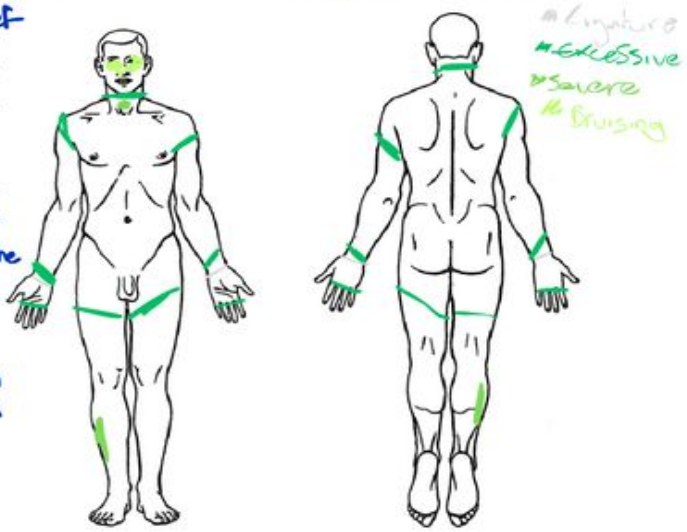
C) Limbs removed in homicidal assault (Due to or as consequence of)

- [x] Head
- [x] Neck
- [x] Face
- [ ] Thorax
- [ ] Abdomen/Lower back
- [ ] Spine
- [x] Upper extremities
- [x] Lower extremities
- [ ] Unknown
- [x] Additional wounds

NARRATIVE/COMMENTS

Victim is 25 year old grandson of police chief A. Beilschridt. Based on the evidence present in this case it can be conclusively ruled as homicide & a targetted statement.

Victim was staged outside residence to be found by police patrol & sustained no injuries unrelated to the fatal assault. Severity of injuries is perfectly consistent with determined intent to remove limbs of victim aided with the use of large deadly weapon. The same weapon was applied in total decapitation of victim's head post-mortem.



There is no evidence of a physical struggle. No defensive wounds/abrasions/bruises on victim's knuckles/hands/arms. However, a laceration on the right lower leg appears to have been recieved while victim was running past assailant as the angle & depth are consistant with a forward-facing attack during initial assault - blunt trauma to the face. Weapon used against leg matches the same used to hack off limbs & head.

Ligature marks found on wrists, likely due to zipties (not recovered on scene) as a method to restrain victim & subject to further torture. Victim was silenced with gag (recovered at the scene) as assailant continued to beat & batter the victim & used a small blade to remove victim's fingers. That same blade was driven into the victim's throat; presumably to further weaken, control, silence & inflict additional suffering & humiliation. This action is fitting of an unique signature as the singular stab wound to the throat destroyed vocal chords, but did not prove fatal. The blade was removed post-mortem & not recovered at the scene.

The circumstance of death occured from tremendous blood loss from the severance of limbs.

Due to the nature of the case & criminal climate, it should be noted that this murder lacks the signature of the Trail Killer, along with key M.O elements. However the weapons used match the murder the previous night suggesting this is the work of the same one murderer.

- [x] Body transported
- [ ] Cremation
- [ ] Cremation permit signed
- [ ] Buried

Body released to: Aloric Beilschmidt 23/10 Funeral home: ~~~

Cost of transportation: $210 Phone number: ~~~

Witness Statement Form

Police Case # S -1042021 **Date of Incident:** 27 / 10 / ~~~~

Witness' Name: Officer ~~~~ Day Phone (~~~~) ~~~~ - ~~~~

Witness' Address: ~~~~ Evening Phone (~~~~) ~~~~ - ~~~~

Address: ~~~~ Zip ~~~~

Statement Taken at: 06:37 am On: (Date) 27 / 10 / ~~~~

In the Presence of: Alaric Beilschmidt, ~~~~

The undersigned witness does willingly give this statement knowing that a person commits a crime of the fourth degree if he/she makes a written false statement which he/she does not believe to be true, on/or pursuant to a form bearing notice, authorized by law, to the effect that false statements therein are punishable according to N.J.S. 2C:28-3.

NARRATIVE:

I was making the rounds on my pre-established curfew patrol route with my partner, officer ~~~~ when I noticed a strange shape down a street from our route. I didn't think much of it, I assumed it was a homeless person or weirdly positioned garbage bags or something that wouldn't be serious but I still insisted on checking it out. Honestly I may have been a little paranoid after the murder the night before. So I went ahead of my partner and felt something was off when I noticed puddles of something reflective on the ground and that the shape was vaguely human like. When I came closer and could make out the scene and smell. I sent out an en mass message over the general police frequency to alert all patrolling officers before finally making the call to emergency services.

I found the body of Roderich Edelstein reconstructed to be propped against the wall of his residence fence. His limbs and head had obviously been severed but placed to sit as if they hadn't and he had his navy coat propped on his shoulders to keep his arms against his body. His face was in tact and he was wearing his glasses so I recognised him right away, as most of the task force were familiar with him being the Chief's grandson. There was a piece of paper stuffed into his mouth, which I didn't touch out of suspicion that it might have been a trap somehow like there might have been poison on the paper, which I realise was a stupid fear but in that moment I was just in the head space where anything horrific could be possible. In hindsight my reasoning for leaving it should've been because I would've disturbed the scene but I couldn't think straight or stop myself from shaking.

I stayed on the scene as my partner combed the area for the assailant. I noticed no activity between the discovery and the arrival of additional officers along with other service allies. During that time I was left with the unnerving feeling that I was being watched though I could not see anything suspicious. My instincts believe that Roderich's killer was still watching.

I stayed on scene for the remainder of my shift and answered all questions directed my way. I did not leave the scene until past curfew ended and the scene had been thoroughly examined before cleaned.

Signature of Witness: ~~~~ Page 1 of 1

(Rev. 7/18) Signature must be witnessed by an officer

Chain of Custody Form

EVIDENCE/PROPERTY CUSTODY DOCUMENT	TRACKING NUMBER [redacted]
	CASE ID NUMBER S-1042021

RECEIVING ACTIVITY	LOCATION Police precinct HQ	
NAME, GRADE AND TITLE OF PERSON FROM WHOM RECEIVED G OWNER G OTHER Roderich Edelstein	ADDRESS (Including Zip Code) [redacted]	
LOCATION FROM WHERE OBTAINED Scene of crime; victim's residence; (former officer) Ludwig Beilschmidt's residence	REASON OBTAINED Evidence	DATE/TIME OBTAINED 27th October

ITEM NO.	QUANTITY	DESCRIPTION OF ARTICLES (Include model, serial number, condition and unusual marks or scratches)
01	1	**Navy coat** -Long knee-length tailor fitted navy coat. Covered in dried blood and other bodily fluids. Tested in 14 locations but no indication of blood or other evidence from any individual other than the victim. No hair or other form of foreign DNA was present
02	1	**Button down white shirt** -Tailor fitted shirt covered in blood. 4 tests were administered and no blood other than the victims was found
03	1	**Glasses/Frames** -Standard rectangle vanity frames, not prescription. Blood matched victim only. Was tucked into the front of victim's coat
04	1	**Jabot** -(formally) white frilly necktie made of lace which attaches to front of shirt. 2 Blood tests administered but no blood other than the victims was found
05	1	**Black dress pants** -Tested for blood and no blood other than the victims was found. No noticeable damage beyond normal wear and current circumstances
06	2	**Black dress shoes** -New condition, no unusual wear on the soles or laces. Tested for blood and no blood other than the victims was found.
07	1	**Undergarments** -Plain underwear, checked by forensics and nothing unusual found
08	1	**Small size spiral notebook (found in coat pocket)** -Red spiral notebook with simple notes jotted within. Looks like daily planning, reminders, fleeting thoughts pertaining music theory. Tested for fingerprints but none other than the victims was found
09	1	**Multicolour retractable pen (found in coat pocket)** -Blue and white pen, has 4 different colours of ink. Black, red, green, blue. Lacking fingerprints from anyone besides victim
10	1	**Printed note (found in victim's mouth)** -Covered in blood but print still illegible. Big font in 'new times roman' expressing desire for attention, along with desired moniker and intent to continue killing. No fingerprints or unique details pertaining to the printing were discovered
11	10	**Fingers of hands (found in victim's mouth & throat)** -Eight fingers and thumb of both hands found in victim's mouth and throat, placed post-mortem. (All above recovered at crime scene)
13	1	**Printed note (delivered via mail 27th Oct)** -Big font in 'new times roman' teasing the death of the victim to remaining family member Gilbert Beilschmidt (cousin) through the use of phrasing the incident as a present. Assailant would have to have knowledge of Gilbert's address to achieve this, information that could've been retrieved from Roderich. No fingerprints or DNA evidence was recovered. (recovered from Ludwig Beilschmidt's residence (deceased), cousin of deceased victim)
		END OF EVIDENCE

How's this for attention grabbing!
I am the Battle axe butcher and I want to give the trail killer some competition!
Watch out because Im gonna make a name for myself and everyone will know who I am!

CASE: S-1042021
Oct 27
Stuffed inside of victims' mouth. 'Attention grabbing' reference to Police Chief interview same night (18:00)
Indicates murder was premeditated (obvious given victim)

I know youve been feeling like shit for a while so just watch the news I think it'll cheer you up. Youre welcome ;)

CASE: S-1042021
Oct 27
Sent via post addressed to
Gilbert Beilschmidt

Interviews were still being conducted and despite the short time frame, *thousands* of people had been questioned - Anyone and everyone remotely tied to Roderich and that night. Alaric had to resort to involving *volunteers* to collect the information because the police force was stretched thin enough as it was. Bringing in law enforcement from other states and related fields to policing wasn't an easy choice, but it was unfortunately necessary.

Alaric hoped his initiative would provide the manpower the workforce desperately needed to combat this case. The silver lining, if you could even appreciate such a thing in a situation such as this, was that the Copycat Killer hadn't struck again.

Though Alaric knew it was only a matter of time. Extremely imminent considering his newest statement. He'd have to dedicate some time thinking about what the so-called 'Battle axe butcher's' next move was going to be without being blinded by fury.

And then there was *still* the memorial. Unveiling that outside Ludwig's crime scene was going to be an important play that Alaric knew he had to handle delicately. The real silver lining was that Roderich was killed *before* the memorial and not *after*, when the police would've lost the opportunity to scope for him there.

Because Alaric knew the Copycat killer would be there. 100%.

He *knew* the Copycat killer had been following all the reports and news since the moment there was speculation of a serial killer originating in that park. The Copycat had been eating up everything that came out of the investigation and felt a high like no other and got *hooked*.

The Copycat would react to anything the police put out there. All Alaric had to do was use the Copycat's attention-seeking nature to manipulate his own downfall. And as the Chief of Police, Alaric Beilschmidt had the perfect idea to pull reactions from him.

The Copycat would be moved by displays of emotion. Alaric knew exactly how, when and where to provide one. Unfortunately it hinged on the cooperation of his grieving grandson, but the Chief was determined to pry compliance from him. With the memorial as the next big event and so close on the horizon, it was important to get his pieces ready for his next big play.

Alaric cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders before picking up the complete Copycat Killer profile, revealing the Trail Killer's underneath.

Despite the risk, he had to keep his full focus on the Copycat Killer. Because, for all intents and purposes, the Trail Killer was inactive. That may change after his misleading statement to the press, but if it *didn't*... Alaric would have to seriously consider why.

Because he knew the Trail Killer's profile inside and out, he had to question why the cause for the curfew was complying with it. There had to be a reason for his dormancy, especially with someone creeping on his domain. Alaric made a mental note to have someone investigate the possibility that the Trail Killer was hospitalised or arrested for something irrelevant and *that* was keeping him from murdering. He knew it was tedious, but he needed *something*, anything. Even if it was just ruling something out.

But until then, there were more pressing matters. With a sigh, Alaric rubbed his eyes as he mentally recounted what had been included in the 'Battle axe killer' profile.

The Copycat Killer had stabbed Roderich non fatally in the neck, before severing all limbs and waiting for him to die. *Then*, if *that* wasn't enough, removed his *head*. After staging the body to be found, the killer left a note for the police trying to establish an identity by claiming his desired moniker. That alone screamed this killer was all for the 'glory'.

But behaviour isn't always identified as what a killer leaves behind, but also by what they *take*. Roderich's violin was missing; an obvious and invaluable souvenir and Alaric wanted it *back*. That was his grandson's and he couldn't bear the thought that Roderich's beloved violin was in the hands of his *torturer* and *murderer*.

There was also the gloating letter addressed to Gilbert to consider. A letter which heavily implied that the Copycat *knew* Gilbert was upset with Roderich. Prying that from personal detail from Gilbert was like pulling teeth, but it was pivotal information because even if the killer wasn't known to Roderich, he was certainly connected to Gilbert.

If that was the case, there was a high probability the Copycat had already been interviewed. The Chief just settled for having someone reexamine the interview files with the profile in mind and make a list.

Because his time was valuable and working out the Copycat's next move was of *dire* importance. He wouldn't have his grandson sent to a safehouse now, or that would be admitting weakness. Besides, he was certain that the Copycat had a different goal in mind.

Given his false statement, Alaric was sure that he would be seeing an angry letter. Whether that was sent to the precinct... or stapled to a body, it remained to be seen. But if it were to escalate, the Chief knew the Copycat would challenge the police and Alaric would have to do everything in his power to keep the public oblivious to how many killers are really out there. He could just pin the Copycat's efforts onto the Trail Killer once again... but ideally he'd hide them completely.

He may have to speak to the news outlets after all and have his lawyers hand out NDAs...

But what *really* made him angry about was thinking about *how was this going to end*?

Because it was evident the Copycat was so inspired by the Trail Killer... if he wasn't stopped, would copying eventually evolve into competition? Would at some point, the Copycat want to outdo the Trail Killer's flames?

The Chief didn't want to imagine how that would manifest. The Trail Killer blew up a service station... The Copycat could commit an act of terrorism far greater than that by picking anything *worse*. He could pick any building of importance in the city and evidence from Roderich's murder, the Copycat's planning ability was phenomenal. Despite the risks, he wouldn't hold back.

And if it wasn't going to be a building... it was going to be a *person*. And it wouldn't be random, it would be *orchestrated*. The Copycat was *cruel* and would turn it into a *spectacle*.

That made Alaric's blood run cold. Both options were evil and there was no lesser. Both would have the city in a chokehold of terror and Alaric vowed to do everything in his power to prevent that from happening. The Copycat wouldn't stop unless stopped and would only escalate. Considering what the Chief had already seen... having had to identify his grandson at a morgue...

It harrowed him to think how far this new killer would go.

Alaric sat both serial killer profiles down, side by side. The Copycat had to be compared to the Trail Killer because his case was tangled at the roots.

He knew both killers were compensating for a lack of purpose and failure in their lives. Both were inadequate nobodies, whether that was objective or subjective to society, it was apparent to *them* and they wanted to be someone. They found power in their depraved acts and the notoriety it brought.

Alaric glanced to the Copycat case's pile of paperwork, sitting to the side of the profiles. Roderich's autopsy was on top and staring at him.

His grandson being stabbed in the neck was no coincidence. There was no doubt and no debate. It was a homage to the Trail Killer if he ever saw one. All the public knew about the Trail Killer's preferred method was a knife to the neck. Quick and messy, in the Copycat's case, it was certainly a signature opposed to a means of murder. It was done just for *fun*. He hated to say it but it was obvious that while both these serial killers wanted to make a statement, it was obvious one of them enjoyed this far more than the other. One revelled in the cruelty and was definitely more concerning...

Because the Copycat didn't stop at just slicing the throat, cutting Roderich's vocal chords and stopping short at his artery. From a practical standpoint it was a means of silencing-

Alaric tore his eyes from the autopsy, ignoring the sweat tickling the back of his neck. If he wanted to get inside the Copycat's head, he'd have to look at the inspiration. Hence why he had the Trail Killer's profile in hand.

Holding it was bitter, knowing it surmised Ludwig's life's work. He died for this profile. I left a hollow feeling inside his living grandfather.

Alaric grit his teeth and skimmed the profile of the *flith* that started it all.

A loner, aged between 18-25. Highly intelligent due to the technique of luring and isolating his victims. His attack style is that of a blitz attack, short and sharp, not dragged out. He doesn't enjoy excessive cruelty and feels incapable of drawing out a scene. Clearly derived from low self-esteem.

For the Trail Killer, the act of murder is spontaneous. However, the choice of victim is not. Victims are likely to represent someone in his life whom he feels overwhelmed and defeated by. His motive is anger or hatred towards society, seen in his choice of random victims and craving publicity. He projects his pain towards these victims and leaves them to be discovered, 'outed' as the bad people they are.

He is socially outcasted (or formally was, and now endures self-imposed isolation) due to something out of his control, but not something immediately obvious. He is an incredibly normal individual and can mask his true nature. His otherness is not physical (eg ache scarring, physical disability) as able to gain trust and manipulate victims, along with blitzing them and leave the scene.

Prior to killing Kirkland, he had a pathological hatred for others from years of mistreatment. The feeling waned after he began killing as a form of regulation. This is evident as he doesn't interact with the police.

There is no remorse for his victims, neither at the moment or ongoing. He doesn't touch the victim at all to make them 'comfortable' or less 'confronting' or anything that would point to guilt. Wants bodies to be found and make a statement. He is primarily after attention and relishes in publicity. Initially, attention was secondary to the act of murder itself. But now his notoriety has bandaged a deep formative wound and he must continue killing to keep the wound contained. He will not stop unless stopped.

Likely keeps a diary of the murders as a souvenir, or something equivalent. It would be modest and easy to hide as he does not live alone and has obligations during the day.

He has no additional education after completing high school. He has a drivers license but either no reliable transport or a fear of driving, as vehicle transport has never been a factor in any individual murders.

He's stuck in a caregiver role and feels suffocated by it. From his hunting schedule, it's evident he's either caring for a single parent or an older sibling.

Suffering from hypervigilance that manifested in childhood, he is following the news and investigation closely but has no intention to interfere with the case or taunt police in a public spectacle. His only motive is to evade capture, keep tabs and inflate his ego. However he holds resentment towards the police for hiding his work and sees them as an unjust authority figure, which he strongly dislikes due to having a lack of autonomy in his life. Both current and during formative years

Alaric set the Trail Killer's profile down face-first and shut his eyes. Had he dealt with that menace before Ludwig...

It was hard not to feel like Ludwig's blood was on his hands, especially now that it couldn't be done all he could think about was how he could've taken different actions to prevent it.

But he knew who was responsible, truly responsible in all legal and moral definitions.

It was the Trail Killer. And if not for him, the Copycat killer would've never been inspired to go after Roderich. Roderich would still be alive, still play music with inspiration, passion and captivate audiences as he left behind a legacy.

Now neither of them will build or inherit a legacy. Alaric's retirement plans bleed out on orders he gave and orders he didn't...

He balled his fists, arms tensing as pain washed through him. Blood splattered on the Trail Killer's profile and at seeing the red droplets, Alaric put that paper aside.

He needed to focus on work. After grabbing a tissue and pressing the shallow wound, he turned his eyes to the Copycat's profile and began skimming.

A male aged between 20-29. Having chosen the moniker "Battle axe butcher", it's evident he's after notoriety and finds exhilaration in fear. To him it is a game and the equivalent of being a celebrity. This individual has a sense of personal grandiosity, one that does not reflect his real status. Suffering from a degree of narcissism, he wants to compensate for feeling inadequate and undervalued. He is unable to truely connect to those in his life despite yearning to. He would appear connected on the outside and to the other party, but something inside him prevents him and leads to a sense of lonliness.

From the crime scene, it is apparent the degree of control and orchestration is thrilling. As the murder is drawn out, it's obvious the killer is not personally or socially inadequate. This is a confident individual with a lot of charisma and used to getting his way. He has the physical strength to subdue and control an adult male and reeks of cockiness to continue the intimidation.

The choice in victim is not spontaneous, and neither was the act. There was excessive planning beforehand and the murder the night before Roderich was evidently a 'trial run'. The Copycat was aware of the stakes and had to practice and prepare for someone high-profile.

From the level of excessive cruelty in both murders, the Copycat is an individual who has had sick fantasies for a long time, likely awoken by the Trail Killer.

Roderich's murder was planned, however how far in advance is unknown. It would likely line up with notable events in the Trail Killer's timeline, weeks or months ago. However, the identity of the victim would not have been decided until Ludwig Beilschmidt's murder and the fallout afterwards.

The Copycat is an opportunist and relishes in feeling smarter than most by indulging in his cruelty. Roderich was murdered on the day of his birthday, a fact that cannot be overlooked as coincidence. This points to Roderich having known his killer to some passing degree and even motivated the personal encounter to such heights of torment. As Roderich suffered trauma to his face, viewed through this context, that act reads as depersonalisation stemming from hatred rather than remorse.

Roderich and his killer likely had clashing personalities and the Copycat felt aggravated by him. Ultimately, a polygraph would be redundant because the Copycat can convince himself he had a 'normal' relationship with Roderich and did nothing wrong.

The Copycat would love to be a police officer or hold a position of power, respect, and authority. Currently he feels he is in a menial job below his abilities and undervalued. It is unlikely he is working full time, as the change in demeanour between daytime and nighttime activities is difficult to hide. He spends a lot of time at the scenes, before and during his encounters. It is more likely he is working part-time or at night. Unemployment is an unlikely option and would be personally humiliating as this individual is constantly comparing himself to his peers despite seeing himself as above them. He would have a lot of insecurities about how others perceive him. Unfortunately, that can't be manipulated for the investigation's benefit as the Copycat's existence must remain a secret. The rist of inspiring more copycats is too high and giving into the Copycat's desires would only give him more courage and power.

Lastly, due to his attention-seeking nature and seeing this as a game, the Copycat Killer watches and reacts to the media. This is his biggest weakness to be exploited

Alaric couldn't keep reading, not when his eyes were straining so hard and he could feel an aching tension in his head. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with eyes closed.

He *knew* he had already interviewed the Copycat after Roderich's murder. That was the most frustrating part. In an effort to collect as much information as possible, they interviewed anyone remotely tied to Roderich and his last day alive, amounting to *thousands*.

But with more information and some deductive reasoning, he knew whoever it was shared a common thread in both Gilbert and Roderich's lives. He won't be able to hide forever.

If the memorial wasn't already set so soon, the Chief could've orchestrated to lure the Copycat in. He could've asked for civilian volunteers for the event knowing that Roderich's killer would apply.

But it was too late. His own hubris was once again his pitfall. He had laid his cards out and there was no taking them back. Alaric had wanted to set the date of the memorial as soon as possible to catch Ludiwg's killer... if he wasn't so damn set on living through the definition of insanity...

The Trail Killer had slipped notice for Ludwig's funeral but Alaric *knew* he was there! Unless there was merit to the Trail Killer being inactive by choice, suddenly going missing immediately after Ludwig's death and missing his funeral. But not being immediately spotted does fit the Trail Killer's profile. He would just have to cross-check the list of attendees for Ludwig's funeral and the memorial because both killers *will be there*.

And if that didn't provide any results, Chief Beilschmidt was in no way lacking ideas or plans.

The top of his list was to be put into motion *today*. Because if he had his way, there would be an arrest before the memorial.

He picked up the landline attached to his desk. One word to his subordinates working the investigation, and they would see it through to perfection.

With Roderich's death being public, there would be an outcry of grief and an outpour of sympathy.

He would have the publicist of the precinct organise a mural where Roderich was found and invite the public to treat the location as a grounds for rememberence. That would only make the area more appealing to the Copycat, who would definitely show up... unaware of how highly surveilled it is. Alaric knew it was only a matter of time before one night, the killer would be the only one to visit.

Despite the immense grief Alaric was shouldering, his determination was never stronger. He would not rest until he saw *justice*.

Chapter End Notes

You may start theorising now >:) Copycat Killer arc has officially begun...

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

Okay, so far here are who everyone suspects of being the Copycat Killer:
Alfred: 1
Antonio: 2
Gilbert: 2
Ivan: 1
Mathias: 4

Their cousins couldn't stay forever. Matthew was glad when they reluctantly left with the promise of catching up soon. He could see they were worried and felt guilty, but ultimately, they must've picked up on the twins' demeanour that they couldn't stay. With them gone, that was one less thing to worry about, one less obligation weighing on his shoulders and obstacles getting in his way. At least he knew Alfred's song and dance of sucking up to them and agreeing so enthusiastically was just that - a *facade*. If only Alfred knew what it was like to be Matthew all along. To think and feel one way but be held at social gunpoint to act another.

Too bad Matthew was too preoccupied to find any amusement in it.

Another thing he couldn't miss was when Steve and Zack left, the house didn't return to normal. Not that it changed drastically, because nothing ever truly changed, but the suffocating tension never left. It hung around and the anticipation was tense enough to make anyone sick from the stench of eggshells.

But Matthew knew he wasn't going to break. He couldn't say the same for Alfred yet.

It was close when he got a call asking him to go to the police station for an interview... Alfred had seemed worried then and just one minor inconvenience from lashing out... but from the way Matthew heard his brother talking to himself in the bathroom mirror, Alfred knew the police were oblivious to his involvement and were only questioning him because he knew the victim.

Even when Alfred came back hours later, looking like he'd collapse and sink into the floor, he still kept up an act to puppet his shell.

Matthew didn't know what to do. *If he should do anything* or *if anything could be done*. He didn't want Alfred to stay like this, if only because it made Matthew so uncomfortable. A selfish reason to not want his brother to break, but a reason Matthew could live with.

Considering the routine Alfred slipped into, it seemed he was close. As soon as the sun started dipping below the horizon, Alfred was darting around the house, making sure every single door and window was locked. When Matthew asked, all Alfred had to say was something about the curfew as dismissively as possible.

Matthew didn't know why he asked when he already knew what it was about. Seeing the 'Trail Killer' in action... witnessing Roderich's mangled corpse being handled... had really shaken Alfred. There was no denying it, not when Matthew *knew* Alfred was still sleeping with his door barricaded and his gun tucked underneath his pillow.

Matthew did feel bad for him, really. Witnessing his brother break like that had pulled some primal reaction from him that he didn't know how to name.

It also left him wondering how *he'd* react if he saw the same thing. What if it was him, pressed against the shadows and frozen in fear as he saw the 'Trail Killer' in action? If he had seen someone handling a corpse... well, Matthew didn't know how he'd feel. Probably nothing, considering how far he's come.

But seeing the murderer handle the body without any reaction, *especially* if the body was brutalised as much as Alfred described...

Matthew knew what fear felt like. His life had been defined by it for so long, and now he no longer felt it.

He'd like to think he wouldn't be afraid and wouldn't lock up like Alfred did. Sure, he wouldn't be stupid enough to walk up to the killer, but he'd at least have his agency.

But what he was truly glad about was the silver lining: Alfred wasn't going out at night.

Still, Matthew couldn't help but wonder when the other shoe was going to drop. Alfred might be shut down and ignoring his friends... but knowing that they were still going out at night to play vigilante, it was only a matter of time before Alfred found the courage to join them.

Matthew also wondered if Roderich was going to have a funeral on the same scale as Ludwig's. Given that Roderich was the Chief's grandson... but on the other hand, Roderich wasn't a decorated officer. Matthew didn't know why he worried that would be the case and considered that had he been the one to kill Roderich, then he would *want* there to be a large funeral. But since he hadn't... and someone had hurt Roderich far more excessively than the *real* Trail Killer would've...

Matthew didn't know what to expect but he knew there would be a funeral. As bitter as he was about not being the cause for it, he knew it was the last time he could see Roderich *and* he couldn't pass up an opportunity to observe the Chief. Considering there was a new player in the game, Matthew knew he needed more information sooner rather than later.

He knew how to play it and fly under the radar if there was a funeral. All he had to do was get in using the friendship card and sneak in early to avoid detection. That should be easy enough if Gilbert was forced to play a role again... which would be highly likely. Not that Matthew would know at this rate, considering Alfred was acting like a shell of himself and Matthew may have to slip his phone again because he wasn't keeping tabs on his friends.

Though chances are his friends were *still* giving him space and chalking up Alfred's distance to Arthur's grave being exposed.

The only reason Matthew didn't ask Alfred whether he knew anything about Roderich's funeral was that Matthew thought the Chief might mention something in his postponed statement. Or in the upcoming memorial unveiling. One or the other felt like a safe prediction given how the Chief wouldn't want to pass up the opportunity to set a trap.

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The Chief's statement came later than Matthew expected. If he thought *he* was late to the party by learning what happened to Roderich, that feeling disappeared when the Chief waited *days* to even acknowledge it.

It left Matthew wondering if someone had forced the Chief's hand. Was he really planning on keeping information from the public yet again? Matthew could tell Alfred was anxious about that being the case, but there was no way the police would pass up an opportunity to use it to their advantage. Matthew had to hand it to him; Chief Beilschmidt was tenacious. He said as much to Alfred, but that barely soothed his nerves. He continued to sit tightly on the couch, staring at the TV like it was the only thing that existed.

Matthew knew to keep the police's tactics in mind as the news reporter introduced the Chief's statement and the camera cut to him. Once the Chief began to speak... that alone changed everything. Not that he should've ever expected the status quo to stay the same.

Still, Matthew wasn't prepared for this. He could feel his muscles tense as the Chief's words rang in his ears.

The Trail Killer was responsible for Roderich's death. The Trail Killer was responsible for everything.

No mention of anyone else.

It was like he was a child again, being accused of something he didn't do. An instinctual feeling of fright caused him to lock up as years of conditioning took over.

It didn't make sense. Not that it ever did. Despite everything the acts he committed represented, he was *proud* of what he accomplished. Maybe because it was *his choice* and represented breaking *free* of his conditioning. Represented fighting back and refusing to be a doormat. Yet the moment he was *blamed* for something he had no part in... even if he *wished* he had done it, he felt something he didn't like.

If only there were a way to kill the Chief. If ~~Matthew~~ the Trail Killer murdered him, then he'd be conquered once and for all.

But that was only a fantasy. One he could entertain later. He already knew how he'd make the Chief ultimately suffer and that was by having Gilbert disappear... The Chief would search desperately and Gilbert would only reappear after the Trail Killer left a tip leading the police to his personal graveyard.

That was nice to fantasise about too. But once again, Matthew could do that later. Right now, the TV was still playing and the Chief was still speaking.

The Chief spoke with such conviction and authority that Matthew briefly worried if the Chief didn't doubt it at all. But his inner voice, one that had been stifled and suffocated his entire life, was speaking up and he knew to listen to it. After all, look how far it had gotten him. He *knew* the Chief, had witnessed what that man would do and how far he'd go. This... this was a trap. He could see it so clearly and yet it left him feeling so strange because this time, it was intended for someone else.

The Copycat would be watching this... Matthew didn't know how he felt about that. He didn't even know what this new killer would feel about it. Being unable to predict that made him worry. The Copycat might not even realise the Chief was doing this on purpose... and then what?

It was hard to concentrate because Alfred was muttering. It was annoying but he knew asking for it to stop wouldn't get him anywhere. If anything, it would just turn the hostility on himself. Matthew glanced at him, wondering if he should acknowledge his twin's anger as Alfred fisted the remote and bounced his leg. He was spitting out hatred directed exclusively at the Trail Killer and almost audibly grinding his teeth together as he glared at the Chief. All while going on about *justice*. It was obvious he just wanted to make up for the night he froze and *watched* Roderich be left out...

Did Alfred blame himself? Alfred had some childlike notions about how the world worked and Matthew didn't have time to project assumptions about his brother's feelings, not when his brother's phone was ringing.

Alfred glanced at his phone screen, giving Matthew a fraction of a second to see 'Gilbert', before immediately answering.

"Lemme guess, you're watching this?" Alfred barked into the phone, never taking his eyes off the TV.

Matthew leaned towards Alfred, propping up his head with an arm on the couch to make it look natural.

Alfred's hearing wasn't the best. Years of loud headphones had left his brother with the habit of having the phone as loud as it could go, even when not on speaker. It worked in Matthew's benefit when he could *just* hear Gilbert's voice.

"Yeah that's why I called!" Gilbert huffed. "There's no way you're keeping me home so how about we work together to bring this fucker down."

"Dude, what about Feli-?"

"Don't bring him up! It's not like I want to leave him but I want to find this *arschloch* too! He'll thank me later once I do what Opa couldn't do!"

"Yeah but then isn't poor Toni having to worry about the both of you!" Alfred grunted. "Dude's totally stressed out and what if he kills-"

"No he doesn't! I can handle myself! I have a plan!" Gilbert's volume was climbing. "Toni and Feli will be fine! There's no alcohol at home which isn't really awesome but that doesn't even fucking matter! We need to work together to bring the Trail Killer down before he kills someone else!"

Alfred goes to argue, but falters. His face goes pale as a look crosses it... Matthew *knew* Alfred was remembering.

"Gil I..." Alfred gripped the phone hard. "You need to know something."

"What?" Gilbert's tone stilled when he recognised the urgency in Alfred's.

"I saw him..." Alfred said forcefully. Matthew wanted to facepalm because while Alfred thought that explained everything, it really *didn't*.

"What?" Gilbert's voice was tense. "Saw *who?!"*

"*The Trail Killer*... I *saw* him when..." Alfred winced as he forced his words out. "When he had *killed* Roderich. He- he got away. I couldn't get him... I'm so sorry Gil but-"

"*You saw him?! Why couldn't you get him?!*"

"I'm really sorry but Gil- Gil you have to know that he's so fucked up," Alfred's voice hitched and his hand was shaking.

"What?!" Gilbert's tone was more forgiving but the urgency only increased.

"Dude... the Trail Killer... he's more fucked up then when it was Arthur... and Ludwig... I saw Roderich... and..." Alfred raked his hand through his hair. "Your Grandpa didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"No. He told me nothing. Only that Roderich's dead." Gilbert sounded short of breath. "You're going to, aren't you?"

"Well, only if you want to hear it," Alfred balled his fist. "But I know you do. If you're gonna go out then you have to know." Alfred ran his hand over his face and squeezed his eyes shut. "He didn't just *kill* Roderich... he uh, he tortured him. He chopped him up and stuff... he *tortured* him."

Alfred couldn't bring himself to say more or go into the details, but what he had said had been *enough*. Gilbert's anger immediately came back as there was heavy cursing on the phone.

"You know what? This is it. I'm going to do what I have to to finally put an end to him. It's between him and me. Maybe *you* should stay with Toni if you're so scared because the Trail Killer's ***mine***. He's messed with my family ***enough***."

Before Alfred could argue, Gilbert hung up. Alfred's chest began to heave as he tried to call him back...

The call didn't go through. Neither did the next one. Alfred slammed his phone down on the coffee table with a curse before putting his head in his hands and pulling his hair.

Chapter 47

Matthew noticed the change in Alfred immediately. The sullen quietness and the sudden calmness were a stark contrast to how he'd been acting for the past few days. And now, instead of obsessing over all the windows and doors, instead of barricading himself in his room, Alfred was standing in the kitchen with an energy drink in hand and wearing all black.

His brother was going to resume being a vigilante. *Tonight*.

Matthew loitered in the doorway. He considered acknowledging it and starting a conversation... but he knew how that would turn out. There was a tense determination clouding Alfred's face and Matthew didn't want aggression. Not when his own chest was so tight and he couldn't pinpoint why.

Alfred finished his energy drink with a sigh before carelessly tossing the can into the sink as he strided away. Matthew's stomach lurched with the urgency to stop him, but he ultimately faltered because he didn't know what to do or why he was so desperate to keep Alfred here.

Alfred brushed past him without a word and shut himself in the bathroom. Matthew let out a breath he didn't realise he was holding.

He might have to rope someone else into keeping track of Alfred and holding him accountable; enough pressure might stop Alfred from doing something stupid. But then that begged the question: *who* could Matthew use? Should he call Steve? Antonio? How could he egg them into doing what he wanted?

He heard the toilet flush and he needed something he could use *now*. Organising another person would take too long and he was running out of time.

Luckily, something came to mind. Their cousins had left the leftover alcohol here... Maybe Matthew could make his brother see the appeal of drinking. Matthew located it just as Alfred stepped out of the bathroom.

"Hey, would you like to spend some time with me before bed?" He held up the bottle. "I know you haven't been sleeping well... maybe this will help?"

Alfred didn't know that Matthew knew he was going out tonight. His brother didn't say anything about it so how would Matthew know?

"Not tonight," Alfred said hastily as sharp eyes glanced at the bottle.

"Aren't you tired?" Matthew continued, trying to appeal to his brother. "You've been lethargic all day-"

"Oh, could you just *fuck off*?!" Alfred growled. "Who gives a shit if I'm tired?! There's shit I need to do and I can rest later, alright?"

Matthew's hand tensed around the bottle. It was taking everything he had *not* to react and show his true thoughts about his brother's attitude right now.

"You're only going out because your friends are going out!"

Oh, he didn't mean to give in to temptation. Usually, he had more restraint than that. But he was just so *pissed* off at Alfred that he couldn't contain it.

"I'm going out for plenty of reasons, so fuck off!" Alfred growled, running a hand through his hair and pulling as he paced on the spot. He didn't even spare Matthew a glance as he settled on leaving and stormed off. "Also, I'm taking the house key."

Alfred jerked the front door open and found the key under the mat outside. He then slammed the door and locked it, leaving Matthew standing in the hallway with curled fists and grinding teeth.

Matthew stared at the door, his expression contorted into a foul glare. It felt *good* to let go and express everything he was taught to bottle up, but he loathed it was only acceptable to do when he was alone. Too bad Alfred would never really feel his wrath directly, even if Matthew's dreams explored the possibility that he could show his brother just what he was and what he thought of *him*.

Frustrations that were previously simmering finally reached a boil because of his brother's delusions. Did Alfred really think something would come of him going out on the streets?! It was a stupid compulsion that got him *nowhere*! He never learned anything new and definitely didn't come close to ever finding the Trail Killer!

At least, the real one. What happened that night with Roderich...

No wonder Alfred had to go out. If Matthew thought he was *that* close to catching the very thing he was hunting... yeah, he wouldn't be able to rest. Not until he could forgive himself for faltering when faced with the very thing that kept him going.

Matthew was getting lost in his thoughts but the emotions didn't let up. He slammed the bottle of alcohol down on the counter as the itch came to him, the one that made his fingers tense as he imagined the familiar feeling of tense leather between them, inevitably snuffing out resistance. But the sun was already below the horizon and curfew was in place, so he couldn't even release everything bottled up by dragging someone into the park.

His eye twitched with tension. Ever since Alfred's troubling confession... Matthew hadn't been able to kill. He had retreated into his own head and the thought to go out like usual hadn't even crossed his mind... and now it felt like he was *years* behind and the *urgency* to catch up suffocated him. The fear of being forgotten wouldn't leave him alone and he had to reason with himself yet again.

Matthew gripped the cool counter with searing hot hands as he glanced around, eyes landing on the bottle... he knew there was no way he wasn't going to ruminate. About Roderich, about the Copycat, about what just happened with Alfred. The worst part was knowing there wasn't anything he could do *right now*.

Maybe, if only for tonight, he should take a page from Antonio's book and try to make things feel easier.

Besides, some vindictive part of him reasoned that if he drank it, Alfred couldn't. Then he'd regret Matthew's offer to drink it earlier.

So Matthew flicked the cap off and without even bracing himself, began to drink.

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At some point, he couldn't register how shit the liquid tasted. Drinking completely undiluted alcohol without a mixer was a *tedious* task. But he was fueled by rage and an ensemble of other emotions he had never been taught how to detect or navigate, so in a desperate bid for comfort he had sought his whole life, he drank. It wasn't long until the strength overwhelmed him in a battle that he was completely outmatched in, and unwilling to even fight.

Considering his lack of a social life, Matthew had only been drunk once before. That had been when Alfred hosted a party (one planned without Matthew's input or knowledge at all) and pressured Matthew to take shots until he threw up. Just thinking of it now left resentment bubbling because even though Matthew was trained like a dog to always monitor others and respect their boundaries, Alfred had completely bulldozed through *his* comfort and forced *him* to do something he clearly didn't want to do.

Of course Matthew knew that in his twin's mind, that had been proof of enjoyment so he'd had been hesitant to feel upset towards Alfred then. Matthew didn't remember much from that night, only that he had tried his best to avoid Alfred and the pressure but still failed. Anything else from that night just didn't register and that included his drunk habits.

So he reasoned that tonight wasn't a bad night at all to become angry about missing out on all the formative experiences his peers had gone through already.

Initially, he hoped the alcohol would put him into a restful sleep where he could forget about the turbulent changes going on around him that *of course*, he had no control over. But once he started drinking, he didn't feel like lying down and closing his eyes. Instead, he found himself on the couch with a body as restless as his mind while ruminating *everything*.

The more he thought about it, the more he *really* didn't like Alfred's behaviour. Not just from when he left the house, but all the days leading up to that moment. Matthew clearly just had a blind spot for the baseline he considered 'normal', but now he could see his patience was wearing thin from Alfred's persistent, ugly attitude.

But there's more to it than that. Something inside Matthew was *screaming* and without a release, all he could feel was *pressure*. It really grated on him that he couldn't work out what it was. He never could. How could he when he wasn't ever taught how to recognise himself? No one saw him, and now he couldn't even see himself.

That was hard with an overworked mind. He couldn't bring himself to open his mouth and speak and it made him frustrated as hell. He couldn't escape his own prison of pleasantaries and the expectation to be a mirror instead of *him*. He was trapped and couldn't claw himself out for the air he so desperately needed and now he was dying. All while appearing perfectly fine and *pleasant* on the outside.

He kept drinking, only slowing when the room was spinning and no matter what position he carefully took on the couch, his stomach wouldn't stop quivering.

All Matthew could do was lie there on the soft surface, tensed with precision to avoid further discomfort while his mind churned faster than his liver.

He didn't want to distract himself from it either. Not when thinking was all he could do and all he wanted to. Because now that he really thought about it, Alfred didn't even matter. Not compared to *this*.

The other killer.

Matthew needed to keep tabs, *especially* when the police had a headstart. Matthew had *always* been kept out of the loop and just for once, just for a brief moment, the Trail Killer had been his refuge because *finally* he was the one holding all the cards.

And now someone was playing the same game he was and he was left in the dark yet again.

An idea came to him and Matthew pushed himself to sit with a groan. His tongue felt fat and his head rolled. Slumping was too comfortable but determination piloted his body as he stood and stumbled to the back door, able to open it after a moment of concentration.

Distantly, he found it interesting how his body moved, feeling like a marionette with soggy noodles for strings. He figured he'd have to note what it was like to be drunk, if he ever wanted to weaponise alcohol in the future.

But more important than the alcohol, Matthew needed to keep tabs on Roderich's murderer. He couldn't just sit here and do nothing.

Good thing the sludge pumping through his skull didn't stop him from coming up with a plan. He slid the back door and stepped outside, the freezing night air having no effect on him, even if he was vaguely aware that it had to be the early hours of the morning and he should've been in bed hours ago.

Matthew had the presence of mind to know that being in an altered state, he was making an extremely risky move. Yet he couldn't really register the risk as he walked onwards, at least having the presence of mind to stick to the shadows. The night was still and quiet and Matthew had extensive experience with staying out of sight; being drunk was hardly an obstacle.

It wasn't long until he made it to his destination. Ambling in the dark, muscle memory led him through the quiet streets and into the park. Among the trees, it was easy to feel like he was the only one there as the light bristle of leaves drowned out any noises the city had to make.

He quickly found the police radio, even if his blind eyes seemed to gloss over his surroundings and made every tree look the same. He pulled it out and then turned to stumble home in the same direction he came from, ignoring the urge to go check out his graveyard and sit with the bodies. He knew what he had to do, and the fog in his head wasn't thick enough to stop him.

He hurried back into the house, pulling the curtains shut with numb fingers before stumbling into his room. Alfred wouldn't even know he had left... no one would've.

Now in the security of his own room, he squinted at the radio as fat fingers clumsily turned it on and he held his breath as he listened. He *needed* to hear something about the Copycat, *not knowing* kept him on edge and he *needed* to hear what the police made of this.

His mind wasn't clear enough to make out if this was a fortunate or unfortunate development, but the radio was full of chatter again, reminiscent to before Ludwig had died. It took him a moment to process this change, but he wasn't able to question it when he started getting caught up in what was being discussed.

"-my ten minute check in, confirming I'm alive."

"Alright, I'll cross you off... Robinson?"

"..."

"*Robinson, respond*."

"-Now isn't the time for jokes-"

"-He wouldn't pull a prank like this-"

"-***Robinson***."

"..."

"We need a website for this, over the channels isn't the best way to be doing this."

"Take it up with the Chief."

"Him and his fuckin' gambits, I swear-"

"-Guys this is important, we're already one officer down. I don't think it's a coincidence."

"What's the chances it's the Copycat?"

So the police *knew* this was a Copycat. Matthew's head rolled back as he slumped on his bed. His stomach didn't feel like it was a lone ship being pushed around by the unforgiving sea, and all he was left with was a sense of exhaustion and emptiness.

Still, he couldn't rest. Not when something was clearly happening and he was waiting with baited breath to see how this would all unfold. Through the haze of the liqour his brain had latched onto 'an officer down' and he couldn't breathe until he knew *just* what that meant.

"Don't we have his location? Have the tech give us his location."

"Already on it... I can see that patrol unit #67 is closest and I've already sent the location to your cruiser."

"I don't think Robinson is willingly not responding..."

"Yeah this doesn't bode well...

"Fuck, wasn't he on foot?"

"I think so, we crossed paths about half an hour ago and all was well then."

"Fuck, I don't know why we weren't ordered to do- I don't know, *anything* after what happened before?!"

"I don't think the Chief is active tonight-"

"The ONE fucking night-"

"-Who gives a *shit* if the Chief isn't on. *Someone* can still step up. Who's the supervisor-"

"Yeah I don't know about you but I really don't like being out here tonight."

"Second that. Now I really wish we got that uhhhh what's the word? Whatever, we need more cruisers."

"Yeah but you can only see so much from the streets."

"Beats dying in a shitty alley though."

"Guys come on, we were told to have a *moderate* amount of chatter about relevant-"

"-Well tonight's not a moderate night, innit?"

"The day crew are going to have a field day tomorrow..."

"Alright, I'm at Robinson's location... He's dead."

"*SHIT*-"

"Are you *fucking* kidding me-?"

"*Again*?! That *bastard*-"

"Okay, who saw Robinson last? If we can establish a timeline-"

"I've dispatched backup to your location, stay with the body and stay vigilant."

"I think he's still here... I think I feel someone staring at me..."

"I think you're being paranoid. Just try to breathe, backup's coming."

"How do we know it's the Copycat? Did Robinson have any... medications? Does it look like something that's just a coincidence like a heart attack or something?"

"Don't be optimistic, how could it be a coincidence?"

"It's not a coincidence... he's been dismembered... it's... I'm going to be sick..."

"FUCK!"

"Okay, I'm a minute away from the scene-"

"Are you sure you're alone?"

"I don't know... his body cam's missing too."

"Of course it is, why wouldn't it be?"

"The worst part is this guy's smart."

"Okay I just got word from the supervisor that all cruiser units should check their dashes and immediately navigate to pick up the nearest ground units. There's a chance he was planning a spree tonight and the curfew is *not* going to stop him. We need to limit the victim pool because clearly the police are a target."

"Thank *fuck*. Get me out of here."

"How was this guy able to ambush *two* of our people?!"

"If it's a spree is this this guy's endgame."

"The fuck if I know and the fuck if I'm gonna stick around to find out."

"Oh I'll definitely stick around to find out. Cus I've got a gun and this prick doesn't."

"Clearly he's just fucking taunting us. Isn't that what the Chief said he'd do?"

"I didn't realise *taunting* meant fucking picking us off like *flies*!"

"*Shit*, okay, what if he took a gun after he killed our officers?!"

"Oi, is Robinson's equipment still with him?!"

"His gun is still in the holster..."

"Fuck! So it wasn't even *drawn*?! *How* is this asshole doing this?"

"And his radio's still on him. The only thing taken was... hang on, I can't find his badge."

"Officer White's badge was missing too!"

"*Fuck*, those are his souvenirs!"

"The investigating team is going to have a whole lot of shit to wake up to tomorrow..."

It just kept coming and as Matthew lay there, sprawled out on the bed, he managed to piece together the whole night. As the image became clearer and clearer... his heart raced faster and faster.

The Chief must've given the green light for everyone to use the police channel like how they were before. But why change? Why now? The Chief *knew* that he had the radio so Matthew figured this change must've been for him. Maybe it was to see if the Trail Killer would do something, if he would react. Or maybe the Chief just wanted the Trail Killer to get *jealous* or *intimidated* because of the Copycat.

Matthew quickly stood as an idea came to his mind. He *needed* to kill an officer so he could keep his throne- but groaned when he realised how stupid that was. He had resolved himself to *not* break curfew and because of everything, he had almost considered it!

His knees buckled and he sunk on the bed, lowering his head into his hands as the urge just grew stronger. He *should* find a way to take a police officer while they were on duty. The police force would assume it was the Copycat but the Trail Killer would've gained another addition to the graveyard in the park.

But he couldn't. He didn't want to go out at night because he didn't *need* to break the curfew... and he didn't know who else was out at night...

The Copycat was unhinged and Matthew didn't know how he'd feel if he caught another killer in the act. He didn't know what he'd *do* when confronted with the reality that someone was going to take his spotlight.

That someone... who was on the streets *right now* and scaring the police more than the Trail Killer ever did.

Matthew's stomach seized as he scrambled to find his phone and turn it on. The brightness temporarily blinded him but he fought to keep his glassy eyes open as he tracked Alfred's phone- it was at home. *Shit*. Matthew forgot he had convinced his brother to leave it at home. He ran a hand through his hair and ground his teeth in frustration. He couldn't track Alfred anymore and he just felt like he had shot himself in the foot with such a short-sighted move. It didn't matter if he had memorised all of Alfred's 'patrol' routes, given the new factor of extreme police surveillance, Alfred would be an *idiot* not to adapt.

Leaving Matthew to adapt, with very few choices. Since Alfred didn't have his phone on him, there was no calling with a fake emergency to get him to come home. Matthew's chest was tight as he stood and paced in his quiet room, with only the radio to pierce the silence and keep him connected to the unfolding developments.

He was left behind and desperately scrambling. Morning couldn't come soon enough and there were so many things he had to keep in mind that it felt like he was trying to balance an overflowing jug.

Even through the haze of sludge pumping through his brain, he knew he'd need to check the news and the internet tomorrow to see if the police would report what happened tonight. Would they be transparent about these new deaths? Would they report who killed them? That part was unlikely considering Matthew *knew* why the Chief blamed The Trail Killer for Roderich's death.

More importantly, what would Alfred have to say about all of this. If he saw anything... Matthew needed to find out and he had no idea how he'd do it.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Matthew woke, it felt as though he was bogged in mud that had seeped into his bones and brain. He only realised after one drawn-out and pitiful groan that he was hungover. In his defence, that was something he had only suffered from once before and he had forgotten that was a potential consequence of drinking.

He wondered how Antonio could even weigh up if drinking was even worth it, if he would only end up like this. But when Matthew remembered the night he found Antonio... lamenting about Francis and Lovino while standing on the edge and ready to snuff out his suffering...

Despite all the blankets piled on his bed, Matthew couldn't believe he was still cold. Or at least, he assumed that was what he was feeling. The tremors deep in his muscles weren't going away and he just wished Alfred would come into his room, see him and his pitiful state, and then take it up on himself to make him better. That's what happened the first time Matthew got drunk - when Alfred pressured him into taking shot after shot, leaving him completely *smashed*. What Matthew neglected to appreciate was that at least when that next morning rolled around and he was in shit condition, Alfred stepped up and resumed his self-appointed role as 'the hero'.

Matthew *really* wished for that to happen again now, even if he was beginning to remember what Alfred's behaviour was like the night before. Remembering that just made him groan again and as much as he was still annoyed, it felt distant enough for him to put aside in these pitiful circumstances.

The house was so quiet that he could hear it ringing in his ears. His mouth was dry and he really wanted some water, but standing came with the risk of upsetting his stomach more and being already on the verge of throwing up, Matthew didn't want to make work for himself later by vomiting here.

So instead, he called out, straining to make his voice heard. He heaved for breath as he waited for a response... one that never came. So with a groan, he rolled and reached for his phone, but couldn't bring himself to type out anything to the effect of *I'm hungover, please help*.

So he slumped in bed, defeated and ready to just sleep it off. But when he closed his eyes... more started coming back to him. After he started drinking, he had left the house-!

The radio!

Being hungover was rough physically, but even worse mentally. It took effort to actually think and put things together... and when he did a foreboding sense of unease hung over him. The shivering became more intense as Matthew realised just what he had done and just how *dangerous* it had been. And because he wasn't of clear mind when he didn't, he couldn't even think over it, over and over, until he was *sure* that consequences wouldn't bite him in the ass!

But that paled in comparison to what he had *learnt* last night... The Copycat was active.

Matthew couldn't just lie there. He forced himself up and stumbled out of bed, willing himself to get it together. Though one thing was for sure, he would *not* be drinking again.

The radio was left right beside his pillow and Matthew had to withhold a sigh. After making triple sure it was off, he kicked it far under his bed. He steadied himself on his desk and saw a blurry page sitting there, tipping him off that his glasses needed to be found. But even without them he remembered *why* the page was sitting there and exactly what its purpose was.

He needed to do some investigating and he wouldn't let his state stop him.

After finding his glasses and slipping them on, he reviewed those notes before tearing up the note, letting the slips of paper tumble into his trash. The last thing he needed was for that to be discovered by a nosey Alfred.

Speaking of Alfred... where was he? Matthew stumbled from his room, keeping a hand pressed firmly on the wall as he wandered into the too-cold house. The shivering was getting to be a bit... exaggerated, but Matthew didn't let it hinder him. He needed to strike up a conversation with his brother but now it was looking like Alfred had returned very quietly, or Matthew's hangover just blocked his brother out.

If that was the case, then Alfred was probably already in bed and power napping through the morning. Matthew *really* hoped that wasn't the case but he couldn't do anything if it was. Without wasting any time, Matthew opened Alfred's door-

If his brain was working any faster, the fact that the door didn't have anything piled behind it would've tipped him off right away. But instead, it took for him turning on the light and squinting aggressively at the bed to realise that the shape there was just discarded clothes and *not* Alfred.

Déjà vu?

Matthew's stomach churned and he pressed a hand to his mouth, willing himself to stay in control as the shakes made him wish he had stayed in bed. But that wasn't something he could do. Not now.

He stumbled to the couch as his mind raced as fast as his heart. He knew he had been here before, and he *knew* he shouldn't be jumping to conditions... *but*-

Back then, there was a risk that Alfred could be arrested while playing vigilante. Now? The risk was *much greater.* Being arrested was no longer the worst thing that could happen to him...

Matthew strained to reach for the remote and turned on the TV. The news channel was on, like always, but now he *needed* the Chief to say something. As much as he wanted to know if the Chief would report on those officers... Matthew *needed* him to report on anything and everything. He needed the Chief to be honest about last night because he *needed* to know if Alfred... was in trouble.

Because even if there was a perfectly good reason for Alfred not to be home yet... Matthew couldn't ignore the possibility. Just thinking about Alfred having ran into the Copycat and confronting him... Matthew felt his mouth flood with the promise of bile and he breathed heavily to control it.

Listening to the news was a struggle but he was surprised to actually see Chief Beilschmidt on the news with some new faces flanking him. Matthew *knew* he could recognise one of them but it was

easier to keep his eyes shut so squinting at the TV was out of the question. Throwing up would mean missing the Chief's statement and this was exactly what he wanted! He was relieved that the police were actually keeping the public *half* in the loop.

Only half because the Chief never went into detail. While he confirmed there were two bodies last night, he didn't specify, quoting the investigation as the reason to keep everything brief.

Still, Matthew already knew about there being two deaths... making him sigh in relief because that meant that Alfred hadn't been added to the toll just yet. And because of that he didn't care for the Chief's unspecific message that didn't detail *who* did the killing, leaving everyone to presume it was the Trail Killer. He'd just comb through the internet later, when he felt capable of looking at screens. Until then, Matthew needed Alfred to come back home. Even if he *knew* his brother wasn't dead... he just needed him home.

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It was an hour after Matthew had taken up post on the couch, snuggled by the comforter from his bed and slowly sipping at water, that he heard the front door handle jiggle as a key unlocked it. He perked up, hallway spinning as Alfred quickly stepped in and relocked the door.

"Where were you?" Matthew said, uncaring how his words came out even if they tipped Alfred off to his hungover state. Part of him wished Alfred would notice just so he could see what he would do about it. "Al, the Chief said people died last night, you didn't see any of that... did you? Did you see the killer again?"

Alfred came to the end of the hallway, rubbing the corners of his eyes with a big yawn.

"No I didn't fucking see him. I only saw Ivan and he told me about... *that*." He grunted, almost annoyed at thinking about it. "No it's not anyone we know so- well it's still bad', but y'know!"

Matthew didn't have the energy to react to Alfred's aggression... or be surprised when Alfred backtracked.

"Look... I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for still being such an asshole but I just... I can't get over all this shit that's happened," Alfred sighed, head hanging limp as he crossed his arms tightly. "I don't think I can be okay until I put the Trail Killer where he belongs and... I just want you to support that, okay?"

Matthew neither nodded or made any noise of agreement. It was only partially because of the hangover.

"I'm gonna go to bed," Alfred sighed and walked to his bedroom. "I might go to Gilbert's later and... see what everyone's doing."

There was no mention of interrogating Gilbert for details on his plan for going out at night and it was only because of years of experience in reading people that Matthew could see the defeat on Alfred's face. His brother clearly had other priorities and didn't see the point in reasoning with Gilbert. At least that was something they could agree on, not that any conversation would lead to it, though.

"Okay. I'm just glad you're back..." Matthew said. He wanted Alfred to answer 'where were you?' but pushing that now would only cause conflict.

"Yeah well... another night, another fucking failure," Alfred muttered before shutting his bedroom door, leaving Matthew curled up on the couch in the quiet house.

At least he wasn't alone because like always, he had his thoughts. That was something that had always kept him company and always kept the spark inside him going despite the cold suffocating him. It was the one thing others couldn't truly take from him despite stripping him of everything else.

Still, even his thoughts were betraying him because as his stomach squeezed, Matthew realised he was *panicked* at the idea of Alfred being gone.

Because what if, one morning he didn't come back. What if, someone else- a *police officer* knocked on his door to tell him the 'Trail Killer' had killed his brother?! Matthew knew that couldn't be the case. The *Copycat* had only been interested in those connected to the Chief, such as Roderich and other police officers... would he really have an interest in a random American playing hero?

Still, Matthew wouldn't be able to cope if that was the case. If he stayed home while Alfred was *out there* and got *murdered*?! Matthew could picture himself always regretting it.

And it wasn't just Alfred on the line. Gilbert was more at risk than his brother. But even if he *was* related to the Chief, going out at night could be the one thing that saves him. Matthew hated to think of the Copycat going after *his* target, but if he did, he'd strike at night. Surely he'd stick to pattern since he killed Roderich during curfew. But if Gilbert wasn't home during curfew and the Copycat didn't know this... he wouldn't be able to find the albino and Gilbert would be untouchable.

But for how long?

Matthew pulled the blanket tighter around himself. He *definitely* didn't want Alfred dead... he didn't want *any* of the others dead. Not without his knowledge and *certainly* without him being the cause... But still, he couldn't watch and protect them all.

As he sank back against the soft cushions, an idea came to him. A solution to what he was starting to realise was a big problem as it weighed heavily on his chest and made his heart flutter irregularly.

In conclusion... he'd have to take out the new killer. That was the only way to ensure he didn't hunt someone already spoken for.

Matthew mulled it over as he considered what little choices he had and what he wanted to achieve. What he needed to protect. Sure, it meant breaking curfew, something he hadn't wanted to do... but he thought he complied for long enough. He made his message and maybe there could be an exception. Because killing the Copycat as the Trail Killer? Now *that* would be a statement... and a goal he could slide between now and his personal cemetary.

Author's notes begin here soley so I can upload this image:

Pls share with me, I'd love to see it and don't want fomo :(

Chapter End Notes

Some more people made things inspired by this fic! Check them out below!

Harley (Guest) (ao3) | Morgan (Spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/79rd79gDkoZMHmwtPhfItJ?si=FLeFhWqCSeSv-mQquRMQWQ&pi=SDgX6kxLR0eRl

Ireallylovesleep (Guest) (ao3) | sleep._is_.cool (tiktok) > https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSynSDyd2/

rxeirexy (tiktok) > https://www.tiktok.com/@rxeirexy/video/7568333335437610270

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fortunately, the hangover didn't last all day. That was something he'd attribute to his youth as he resolved himself to never putting himself in that miserable situation again.

Others? Certainly. But that was the least of his concerns now.

It wasn't until the afternoon that he felt like himself again, and what a relief that was because his mind was churning with urges that made sitting around and mining the internet for information *unbearable*.

Despite the pressing urgency... there was also a feeling of *anticipation*. Of *excitement*. It had been a long time since he had gone out at night. A lot of things have changed since his debut and now he was going out again, returning to his roots in a sort of way.

Sort of, he doubted he could lure the Copycat into the park and he found that didn't matter. In fact, it was probably for the best, especially when bringing the police's attention to the park *now* was probably not in his best interest... It had been a long time... but now he felt *excited* about going out at night again.

And now that his brain was sharper than the slosh it was that morning, Matthew was able to reconsider just what the Chief was playing at. Surely Chief Beilschmidt was blaming the Copycat's crimes on the Trail Killer solely so he wouldn't lose face to the public. Being under public scrutiny at *all*, let alone now, would *not* be desirable for him at such a pivotal point. The public could even assume that because the police *hadn't* had the Trail Killer caught already, they were responsible for a new killer entering the scene. If the public learnt that the Trail Killer *inspired* another wannabe serial killer, then the public wouldn't trust the police *at* all to get the situation under control.

And that would only lead to more wannabe vigilantes like Alfred and his crew, except on a scale entirely unprecedented and unlike anything he could imagine.

Matthew dug through his closet and drawers with quiet determination as he thought. A pile of clothes grew on the floor that could help him keep his cover when he left the house during curfew. The anticipation made him nervous; the idea that something could go wrong wasn't an unrealistic one. But he had experience and worse, he had confidence. So he continued to pull out clothes, intending to put together an outfit for *tonight*.

As long as he slept when Alfred slept, keeping up appearances would be too easy.

Still, in the silence of his room his thoughts continued to pace. He couldn't ignore the pressure he felt because of the Copycat. Knowing that someone else was out there, someone *desperate* and *cocky*... someone who could potentially poach his well-earned infamy?

It wasn't just that which forced his hand and made him crave going out at night. Although *crave* would be the wrong word. It was partially true because of the angle of fomo, but there was also another angle. One that was harder to be honest about.

Desperation? No. Fear? Sort of... it was hard to put a word to the feeling that caused his chest to seize when thoughts and images flashed by, ones that were *not* pleasant. But persistent ones.

Alfred was still going out every single night. Matthew *knew* he had to remove the Copycat before the Copycat removed Alfred, but that was just admitting something he didn't really want to consider even if he subconsciously believed it.

Alfred believed in himself, but Matthew had no faith in him.

He didn't trust Alfred to have the guts to use his gun due to his brother freezing up. While he knew Alfred is more than willing to pump the guy full of lead... the stakes were too high and he really didn't trust his brother wouldn't hesitate again. Wouldn't *freeze* up and Matthew... didn't want Alfred dead. He'd rather confront this Copycat so he could see what he was like.

Morbid curiosity was a much more understandable motive than his feelings. He wanted to know exactly what and who he inspired. Sue him, in a way he was *flattered*, even if he was equally threatened.

Since the conclusion he had come to that morning, his goal had become much more refined. With clarity he was able to consider *exactly* what he wanted the outcome to be. It was brutal and simple: He would find the Copycat before the police could and kill him using his old method - *the mess*.

He would carve his signature into his opponent's forehead and win. He'd have to leave some indication to the police to tip them off that this is the Copycat so they could fully appreciate his victory and their loss. The Chief really played the right card by keeping the Copycat's existence from the public because otherwise he'd have to lie to them about how the second killer came to an end.

The more Matthew daydreamed about it, playing it over and over, the more he realised he missed *the mess*. The eruption of blood that stained the whole scene, gurgling and spurting as he tore through flesh, marking his presence in a way that couldn't be ignored... it was hard to not see it as a form of art. It was something he craved to see again. Sure, strangulation was nice. It was effective and made him work for it all the same, but the mess was what got him to here now. And to do it again, splitting the Copycat's throat and leaving him to be found... what a statement. The police would *hate* it so much. Two birds, one knife.

He knew he could find the Copycat before the police did, before *Alfred* did. He knew others' true natures before anyone else and not much could slip past his observant eye when people didn't know he was watching.

Once he had shown up the police and proved their ineptitude, he would revel in the aftermath. And then when the excitement of that started to fade... then Matthew could think about adding Gilbert to the mass graveyard and starting a scavenger hunt.

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Once he had decided on an outfit, he stuffed it under his bed, out of sight until the time came to put it on and shadow Alfred.

It wasn't anything elaborate. Just black jeans, sneakers, a jacket with a hood, the outfit was eerily similar to the one he first put on when all of this started. Only then he didn't need to be so selective about what he wore and he was the only one prowling the streets.

But it wasn't enough. He had the basics there but he needed *more*. Since Alfred had his hockey helmet, Matthew needed something to conceal his face. He also needed to find something to carry items around conveniently because he needed to take more than just his reliable knife and a backpack would be too bulky. It was only the mid-afternoon so there was plenty of time to still go shopping. After all, he didn't want to go out if he didn't have sufficient supplies.

He slipped from his room, listening out to see if his brother was awake. He heard a noise from the kitchen and peeked to see Alfred reheating food with an absolutely dead look on his face, blinking lethargically as if he had just woken up long after he intended, without actually getting the rest he needed. He stared blankly at the microwave, watching his food rotate and Matthew could tell his thoughts were miles away.

Matthew didn't hide his presence, walking up to his brother but didn't make any effort to touch him.

"I'm going to do some shopping... make sure we have enough food and keep you fueled up, eh?" He put on a smile, saying nothing when Alfred jumped.

"Yeah, 'kay," Alfred said, rubbing his face with an intake of breath.

"I'm going to drive," Matthew said, grabbing the keys from where they were sitting. "Did you want anything?"

"Um, yeah, uh," Alfred put his hands on his hips as he seemed to think about it and Matthew really hoped he wouldn't start listing an overwhelming amout of things. "How about I just text you a list cus I only just got up and I don't wanna think about it now."

"Yeah, you can do that," Matthew supposed that was acceptable. "I'll be back before dinner."

Alfred didn't say anything to that and Matthew got as far as the front door before he yelled out.

"Definitely energy drinks!" Alfred hollered.

"Okay." Matthew acknowledged before shutting the door. Then he sighed.

Energy drinks were going to be a no-brainer. Matthew knew he was going to need some for himself and already had a place in his room in mind where he could hide anything he'd need now that he was getting back in the game.

Though this time, he wasn't the one who was orchestrating the game. He didn't like that.

He got behind the wheel and peeled out of the driveway, going through the motions of driving as he continued to think about just what he was getting into.

When the Trail Killer was active - or rather, *known* as active, Matthew was doing things on his own terms. He was going out when he wanted, for as long as he wanted. He never had to exhaust himself and he was always the one in control. Everyone else was just reacting to his actions. But now... he had a little sympathy for Alfred. Because now Matthew was seeing his perspective firsthand.

Alfred *didn't* know when the Trail Killer was going to strike, *if at all*, and went out all night *every night* just because there was the possibility that the Trail Killer could show. And he couldn't take a

night off because the guilt had a chokehold on him that told him the *one* night he took off would be the *one* night he would live to regret...

Matthew didn't even know when the Copycat would strike or if he'd be very active... but here Matthew was resigning himself to destroying his sleep schedule anyway because he had no other choice if he wanted to achieve his goal...

After parking the car he casually walked along the street as he thought about what he needed to do.

First of all, he needed cash. He seriously doubted that any precautions were necessary, but Matthew felt on edge enough as it was. The streets may feel comfortable now, but knowing he'd be back out here after curfew in a completely different environment left a lot to imagine... he could only anticipate what it would feel like and it made him nervous. After all, he gave up on wandering around at night once the curfew was put in effect and he had fallen behind now...

And now that he thought about it, he really should try to get a nap in before he tailed Alfred tonight. Otherwise, he would be looking at a full 24 hours of being awake and that didn't sound appealing at best and was a recipe for disaster at worst...

Getting the cash out was simple enough. He stopped by an ATM and took out as little as possible. Then he walked through the shops at a leisurely pace as he began his browsing.

In the end, he was quite successful while still being mindful for time. He knew he had to get back home in time to have a productive nap *and* make dinner, so that motivated him to make this quick.

Plus it was easy to be quick when Alfred's list only contained things that could be categorised as comfort food because his brother wanted to sweeten his pain with sugar.

He walked out with a bag worth of stuff that he thought could be useful in his endeavours... If he was buying something that could be marked as suspicious, then he didn't buy it all from the same place. And he didn't buy it alone, he always found something innocuous to accompany the purchase so the real item wasn't given full attention.

It may have been a bit pedantic, but Matthew's nerves felt better for it.

And of course, he got twice the energy drinks Alfred had asked for. Not that his brother needed to know that for every can he drank, Matthew would be matching his pace. Not that he could know anyway, since Alfred never paid any attention to him.

Once he got back to the car he dumped everything on the floor of the passenger seat, out of view as another unnecessary precaution. Then he drove home, mind ever pacing all the same.

Having all these items on him would be suspicious if someone saw him on the streets, once curfew had taken effect... but it wouldn't make a difference if he was spotted. Everything would be all over for him if he was caught. Even if he only had the knife on him, that would be enough to end everything. Let alone bringing the *radio* with him...

It would be over if he was caught at all, just like any of the other vigilantes would know. There was absolutely *no* excuse, no reason for any of them to be breaking curfew and the full extent of the law would be hurled at them if caught. But at least they would only be recognised for their good intent, something Matthew did not have.

When he returned home, Alfred was sitting on the couch, watching mindless TV with his legs sprawled out and flopped with horrendous posture. Matthew knew which channel it was, even if there was some reality show on because it was too early for the news. He didn't say anything, and Alfred didn't spot him, making it easy enough to smuggle his contraband in.

Once everything was hidden in his room, Matthew had one last thing to do before he took a nap to prepare for tonight.

"Here's the drinks you wanted," Matthew set the bag on the couch beside Alfred, now only containing things he expected to see. "And the snacks."

"Thanks," Alfred said, eyes never moving from the TV and troubled look never faltering. If Matthew had to guess... it was probably out last night.

Or every night before that, because really it was probably just about *everything*.

"Are you okay?" Matthew asked. Even if he didn't get an answer, he figured it wouldn't hurt to ask. At least then he would've done his part and it was basically muscle memory to try.

"Yeah, just tired..."

"You didn't get enough sleep?"

"Pfft, definitely not," Alfred sat up straighter and stretched. Matthew really hoped this wasn't what he was signing himself up to. "I'm just thinking about how it's probably for the best I didn't see what happened last night cus... man, I still feel really bad about scaring you with the gun..."

"It's okay," Matthew pat Alfred's shoulder. "Also, I'm going to take a nap so please be quiet. It won't be long and I'll make something you like for dinner when I wake up."

"Sounds good, dude," Alfred said with a small smile. Matthew smiled back and retreated to his room. At least by getting his brother excited for dinner, Alfred wouldn't just feed himself and leave without Matthew knowing. He needed to avoid that because otherwise, finding Alfred on the streets while everyone was lurking in the shadows would not be easy.

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Napping was uneventful and Matthew was grateful for Alfred's apparent lack of energy otherwise he fully expected to have been interrupted. But he wasn't going to complain when he woke up feeling refreshed and saw he only had an hour before curfew started.

He kept his word about cooking something Alfred would like. That was easy enough to do when the statement was so vague and non-specifc, especially when Alfred liked a *lot* of food.

He settled on burgers, half because they were Alfred's favourite food and they were easy enough to assemble. Honestly, Matthew couldn't imagine why Alfred would prefer a *bought* burger over a homemade one when they really were that easy, but he already knew the answer.

Regardless he tried not to read into his spoiling of Alfred so much as he plated the food. At least he wasn't in a mood where he found his consideration repulsive and cursed himself for being this way. It was easier to see this as a choice, even if he was sure it was influenced by the turmoil within caused by the looming events...

Determined not to think about that as he sat on the couch and ate, he tried to pay attention to the news that Alfred was giving rapt attention to while he ate his own burger (read: scoffed).

Matthew didn't really expect there to be anything new on the police front, not after that morning. It wasn't really clear if Alfred felt the same but Matthew figured that didn't really matter. If anything, he was just happy to distract himself with other ongoing events in the city. So he was surprised when the news presenter began speaking and the next story mentioned the Trail Killer.

"Police have taken down many channels, forums and groups relating to the Trail Killer and discussions about the serial killer in an effort to reduce the spread of misinformation..."

"Aww come on, what the fuck," Alfred said, throwing his hands up despite the resignation in his tone. "What 'misinformation'? I really fucking wish Lud was here to tell Gil if this was true or just some police scheme. Not that Gil would fuckin' tell me now."

Matthew didn't say anything, solely because his teeth were too tense to open his mouth to speak. Setting his burger down, he took out his phone and started sifting through his usual sources for information... only to see them either 'quarantined', 'seized', 'flagged' or entirely 'disbanded'. He could feel the tension in his body as he put his phone down on the coffee table harshly.

He didn't like this. This was just another thing out of his control, as everything seemingly was at the moment... but he reminded himself it was not a pressing concern. Not now. If he just took a breath and gave it some thought, surely he'd come to the right conclusion about *why this, why now?*

The news presenter continued to drone on and Alfred continued to fidget.

"Are they just doing this to lie to us? Because then we can't actually all talk about it and find out if they're lying?" Alfred huffed, volume rising. Matthew considered it. That was a possibility... but then he remembered what he had thought about earlier during the day.

The Copycat. If that Copycat really was inspired by him... the police needed to crack down hard on discussions that could inadvertently glorify the Trail Killer's actions. Even when people outright *hated* him, there was no denying the power the public gave him in giving him a name to begin with.

The police were terrified of inspiring *more* and surely that was why they gave the Trail Killer the credit for Roderich. Because the last thing they needed was anyone else realising that copying was an option and becoming a murderer was a possibility.

No wonder even places of neutral discussion were shut down. Still, Matthew could imagine the backlash. Even if there was the news and comment sections... there was no way the general public was going to be happy about having their main places of conversation removed and the excuse of the investigation might not be enough to stop them from figuring out something was up.

The news presenter transitioned seamlessly into the next story.

"The memorial of Police Officer Ludwig Beilschmidt will be held in two days' time, according to Chief of Police Alaric Beilschmidt..."

It was about time the Chief set a date, though Matthew had to imagine it wasn't easy when there was so much on that man's plate. Still, that was none of his concern. He knew what he had to do.

Matthew needed to attend the memorial and then find the Copycat before the police or Alfred and his friends did... all while avoiding all of those separate groups of people. If Matthew didn't come across the Copycat on the streets before then, he knew for certain the Copycat would be at that memorial. After all, if Matthew were him, he wouldn't miss it for the world. Whoever this was, he was a wannabe and being surrounded by grief and suffering would certainly move him.

Chapter End Notes

I really, really hope I didn't forget to link one but here's some more things made about this fic! Please check them out!

Ashtjmm (ao3) | Ashleytjmm (Spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4bZq7ssLqLk0rpKo80tb7U?pi=-x_CgXNYSiyLR&nd=1&dlsi=38f1cdee91594f1c
Kanachan158 (ao3) | Kanachan (Spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4ytKKU0auoA36EqrGZD9kC?pi=9fBuh2gGTzuwy
Dragon124 (ao3) | BrieTheCheese (Spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1j1QgoAbtOvK4mM8lv3PAW?pi=T5wrfG5hR6Wau
1no_ro (ao3) | 1no_ro (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRe3MpaR/
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRRAwSqq/
Dragon124 (ao3) | brie.the..cheese (TikTok) >https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfaYPSPu/

I was going to ask for help brainstorming where/how to slide Yao into this fic since everyone seems to be noticing his absence, but then I thought of exactly what to do. He will be making an appearance after the Copycat arc! You may start anticipating now! 😈

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

> My bad about the hiatus. I was (still am) working two jobs, both affected by the season since one is harvest and the other customer service. In short most weeks I was doing 60+ hours at work and add travel it was 70+ a week. I was working all 7 days a week and didn't have a single day off besides Christmas 😬 My bad. I just wanted big number in the bank and I got what I wanted so I treated myself to a little snack as I finally got this typed up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he got ready, he was hit with a sense of nostalgia that came from before this action was a habit and only nervous anticipation. Visions of when he was just starting out flickered by and Matthew caught his distorted reflection in the mirror, making eye contact with his own vacantly determined face.

His overall appearance was unassuming, but underneath his jacket, he had all the necessities strapped to him. Luckily, he found something that could function as a makeshift belt/body harness at an alternative clothing store. He was happy with the results and the items being concealed, even if he thought he may have gone overboard. But he'd rather be prepared. That was why he had trivial items like food and a flashlight, along with pepper spray, his usual knife, and the police radio.

He really wanted to deny the influence of Alfred's favourite Hollywood movies, ones where the male main character is just so impressive and competent in the face of *whatever* that makes everyone else cry. But he didn't want to find out the hard way if he took them as advice and they turned out wildly unrealistic. That would definitely be the dumbest, most humiliating way to be caught.

Matthew ran his hands over a piece of fabric before looking at his face again. He was really doing this, and there was only one finishing touch left. He tied a bandana around his face, pulling it tight and trying not to feel suffocated or muzzled. He thought it was a bit overkill as he looked in the mirror, but he had been camping in the wilderness before and knew you have to prepare for anything.

Unlike Alfred, who never expected that when he left that night. Matthew had already wished his brother goodnight and shut himself in his room with no intentions of going to sleep. Now that he was dressed, he shimmied his window open and climbed out into the fresh night air. After slinking around the side of the house, Matthew crouched and waited for Alfred to appear, ready to follow.

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While the air was initially fresh when he left the house, it soon became downright freezing as the night grew darker and darker.

Matthew had never been bothered much by the cold, but tonight it kept him a little on edge as he tailed his brother with paranoid caution. He could hear his heart beat in his ears as he stalked with

heightened awareness of every little noise, every little shadow. Just birds flying above the vacant streets was enough to make his heart race.

He wanted to just stick to the shadows, lurk and move at a careful pace and not get caught by the many enemies crawling around... but the thought of losing Alfred kept him moving forward. He watched his brother from a distance and was able to tell that he was on edge, but from the way he moved without much of a second thought, it was obvious he had adapted. Oh how the tables had turned...

Matthew could only hope he'd adapt soon. There was a feeling in his stomach that just wouldn't settle as he juggled stalking with the paranoia of being stalked. Every time a police cruiser drove by, Matthew only had a few seconds of deliberation to hide each time, forcing him to be constantly aware of his surroundings in case he was put in that position of having to hide. He hadn't come across any ground forces yet, but he could occasionally hear officers' echoes down streets and he was quick to move past those areas.

The cold didn't bother him at all when with so much going on, the sweat sticking to his skin was the least of his concerns. All he needed was a moment to check in on the police radio and hear if the Copycat was out tonight... and if he was, where he was lurking. Matthew needed to know how close the Copycat was... and how close he was to putting an end to him.

Using the radio while on the move was too intimidating. Matthew needed to be able to hear his surroundings and even if he had the volume at a minimum, he really didn't want to risk it.

Time dragged as all he could think about was checking in to the radio. Until he did he had no idea what to expect. Any moment now he could turn the corner and be face to face with a corpse or the Copycat himself. That would be better than coming across the police. Matthew didn't know what to expect when he finally saw the Copycat, but he had more faith in navigating that and surviving than if he rounded a corner and saw a cop.

But when the moment presented itself, he didn't hesitate. Alfred was determined but only human. He'd freeze and hide as police drove by and that gave Matthew just enough time to pull the radio out and press it right against his ear.

At first there was nothing. Matthew cursed that he didn't have enough time. But with each opportunity, he still turned it on with the same amount on anticipation that *this time* he'd hear about the Copycat.

For the first few hours, there was nothing. Nothing substantial about the other killer, anyway. There was plenty of chatter between police and discussion of their movements... All Matthew could do was keep going and hope that the Copycat would be active tonight. In the silence of the streets, it came to him that maybe this was what the Chief wanted, for the Trail Killer to check out the crime scenes for himself. Maybe that's why he's allowed the channel to be full of chatter again and for the police to broadcast where new victims appear once the Copycat has cut them down.

Maybe he would've, if it weren't for his own stake in the game. Matthew couldn't waste time foolishly checking out the crime scene when Alfred could potentially become one! All he wanted was to know what area the Copycat was in because it wasn't the bodies he was looking for.

Eventually, he got what he was looking for. Had Alfred stopped a moment sooner or later to have a water break, Matthew might've never heard it. He squatted down and pressed the radio right against his ear as he turned the volume as low as possible-

"-definitely our guy," an angry voice spat.

"What's the bet that fucker's long gone and we'll be wasting our time if we swarm the area?"

"Is everything the same? The Chief wanted to know about deviations-"

"God, can't we just tell him in the morning?!"

"No," another voice sighed, "you know what we have to do."

"Fuck me... whatever, when's backup coming?"

"Coriner has already been notified."

"Is the scene secured?"

"I'm holding position with my weapon drawn, what the fuck do you think?"

"Do you see anything-?"

"Fucking no. All I see is a chopped up cop- and since you *want* to know about the fucking differences, then I bet you'd love to hear about how the Wannabe Cat didn't even lob his head off!"

"Oh my God..."

"So everything else... is?"

"Yeah. The Chief isn't gonna be happy about this."

Matthew's chest seized when he saw Alfred moving on and he grit his teeth as he weighed up following or listening to the radio... *shit*, he just needed someone to say where this was! If only Matthew knew whether this was close to them or not, then he could put the radio down.

But Alfred forced his hand by taking a turn and disappearing, and not wanting to lose his brother now Matthew had to turn the radio off and scurry to catch up. He mentally cursed that he couldn't listen to the radio as he walked but the rist was far too great. All he could do was hope that Alfred needed to stop again sometime soon...

But he didn't. Matthew had seriously underestimated Alfred's determination because his brother moved like a storm as he silently strode through the streets with his gun drawn and fingers taunt around it. For as tough as he looked, Matthew didn't have much faith he could really pull the trigger. Still, if the gun stayed out, it could possibly deter the Copycat from targeting Alfred. His brother looked like serious business... but that could also be his downfall. If the Copycat felt cornered... he might decide that Alfred was too much of a threat to ignore.

Matthew hated that he didn't know enough about the Copycat to really know how he thought. He could only make guesses and bet on them.

But at least tonight wasn't a total loss. It took him a while, but eventually he noticed he wasn't coming across any police cruisers. Surely that meant they were all sent to wherever the Copycat had claimed another victim, and that area was nowhere near here. While that wasn't what he was hoping for... it was still a win for tonight. Or that's what he told himself. Alfred was safe and Matthew had just a little more information that could hopefully keep him safe in the future.

Tonight he learnt a little more about the Copycat and there was no doubting that his guy was trying really hard. He was going out every night and managing to target and kill police without hesitation. Without resistance too, apparently, because he wasn't being spotted at all and it was only after blood was spilled that his presence became known.

And if Matthew had to make a guess driven by his own experience, he had a feeling the Copycat would be going out every night to really maximise impact. He would keep going and going and going because just like Alfred, the cost didn't matter. Only results.

Matthew felt the same, which was why he was going out every night too. Because the stakes were too high to do nothing.

He continued to stalk Alfred, now at a much more relaxed pace. He weighed up the risk before deciding to bring the radio up to his ear. The police were still discussing the murder and organising combing the area where it happened - finally tipping off where it was and it was nowhere near the brothers. Too far for Matthew to even consider leaving Alfred because he'd never get there in time and the Copycat would've moved on by then.

So he stuck with following Alfred. If Matthew separated from him and lost him, it would be impossible to find him again and if the Copycat struck again... Matthew would have no way of knowing if Alfred was in danger.

Why did he have to trick Alfred into leaving his phone at home? Matthew needed to think of another way to track his brother's location ASAP.

Everything was silent, save for his mind as he fell back and watched Alfred roam with unwavering resolve, completely oblivious to what had happened during the night so far.

Matthew thought about his plan to use the radio to find the Copycat. It would be a close call if he tried to do it during the window where a body was found and police swarmed to hunt for who was responsible. And if Matthew didn't know where the Copycat was before it was broadcast on the radio, then it was already too late.

Which meant he'd just have to hope he came across the other killer while the Copycat was on the hunt...

It was going to be a close call, he could see that now and it made him nervous. Juggling so much already wasn't going to make it easy... but he was going to do what he came out to do. He owed himself as much.

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The next night was even colder and everyone on the radio was complaining about it when they weren't speculating about what the night would bring. Being the night before the memorial, anticipation was killing everyone.

In preparation for that night, Matthew had thoroughly inspected the police radio and found a way to connect wired earphones to it. It was risky if he couldn't hear everything in his environment while creeping through the streets, but it was *more risky* to be without the inside guidance from the police. So when he went out that night, he put one bud in one ear and crept with heightened vigilance.

An order had been issued over the frequency advising everyone to have their guns ready but *not* to be trigger-happy. No shooting to kill unless absolutely necessary because the investigation would benefit from the suspect being brought in alive. The patrolling police didn't like that too much and kept grumbling but one of them mentioned hazard pay, explaining why the force was still as big as it was.

There wasn't much of a wait. Everyone was caught off guard when instead of waiting for bloodshed in the early hours of the morning, it only took an hour for alarm bells to ring.

Once again, too far away for Matthew to take action.

"Fuck- we've got another officer down, I've pinged the location to everyone."

"It's the Copycat?"

"No shit, I'm not clearing the area without backup."

"Just do a visual inspection, units are on the way."

"I don't see anyone, I've announced my presence and intention to shoot."

"Can you identify the body?"

"Negative, his name badge isn't on him."

"It's missing?"

"Fuck that, what I want to know is how we're still being picked off even after reducing how many of us are going about on foot *and* we've been paired up!"

"Because we need to be checking narrow streets? Were you even listening to the Chief's new-"

"Oi, less chatter until we have the scene secure. Closest unit, what's your ETA?"

"We're arriving there now. I'll have Clemens stay with the cruiser."

"Yeah the last thing we need is another hijacking. Make sure to lock the doors-"

"Wait a minute, where's the partner? Who was first on scene?"

"Hoffmann. What do you mean where's the partner? Whose partner?"

"The dead guy! Everyone on foot was paired off, right?"

"*Shit, you're right*."

"Me and Officer Sidwell are looking now... *oh my God*."

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he's dead... I don't know *how* but the Copycat got them both."

"I'm a minute away, how far is everyone else?"

"ETA the same. Let's get this secure. Hopefully that bastard stuck around so we could get him."

"The Chief really needs to rethink having anyone on the streets at all. Clearly this isn't working and we don't have the manpower to waste."

It wasn't anywhere near where Matthew was tailing Alfred, much to his frustration. But with the night being so young, he knew there was a possibility the spree would continue long into the night... and there was a real chance they'd cross paths.

And if the police pulled their foot units and only have them move by car... that meant that the only ones creeping through the shadows on the streets were the wannabe vigilantes... and the killer.

Matthew wanted nothing more than to find the Copycat... yet at the same time, he found himself dreading the moment.

The police continued to discuss all night long and it seemed they were really taken aback by the gore. It was hard to know if that was because they *were* or if they were just putting it on because the Chief believed there was a *possibility* the Trail Killer would be listening.

The rest of the night dragged as anticipation never wavered. Any moment could be the one when a shadow shifted and emerged with murderous intent. Any moment could be the one where he would have to lunge into action and there would be no time for thoughts.

Yet for the rest of the night... Matthew didn't see anyone else. No cops, no vigilantes, and no killers. He knew that just because he didn't see them, it didn't mean they weren't out there. If anything, it kept him more on edge as he worried about being unable to spot anything until it was too late. He had to assume that everyone was spread out and that was why he didn't see anything... but that barely helped the paranoia that eyes were on him coming from someone he couldn't see.

Because he had Alfred in his line of sight at all times and the police radio, he would know for sure if the next victim was someone he knew.

But no next victim came. Leaving Matthew with his racing thoughts as exhaustion set in. He wanted to adjust to this routine to make it easier for himself and to keep his awareness at a refined level, but to adjust he'd have to spend night after night doing the same... seeing nothing and wasting his efforts.

It took him a few hours before he realised why there were no more murders... The idea hit him as he was thinking about how he was going to be dead on his feet by the time the Memorial started.

The Copycat was planning to attend!

Matthew didn't know why he hadn't thought of that sooner. The police made it very apparent that to catch a killer, you had to think like one. Why would the Copycat want to miss whatever drama unfolded tomorrow? He wouldn't, and he wouldn't want to skip a night of murder when he was so determined to make a name for himself *despite* the police's efforts at blacklisting his existence...

Matthew found it easy to assume that much, having been there when Ludwig was still in the force.

Matthew stopped in his tracks and let Alfred wander on. *The Copycat was long off the streets*. He bit his lip as he watched Alfred disappear from view and hoped that it wasn't a mistake as he turned

around and slunk in the direction of home. Even if he knew something with cold, hard logic, he couldn't fight the feeling inside him that won't rest.

After all, he had never been taught to trust himself. To be sure. He was always wrong and everyone else was always right.

He didn't sleep well.

Chapter End Notes

It's my new year's resolution to finish this fic this year, so let's see how that turns out!
Shoutout to all the support since this started and shoutout to those who were inspired to make something which I've listed below!

Ireallylove_sleep (ao3) | sleep._is_.cool (TikTok) >https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSPrgLMJA/
canadasnnmber1dihrider (ao3) | peypeyy<33 (spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7EHJM4QFUF2syL8ebJydOK
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRYYxwEf/
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR2LGEbA/
apples_andpeanutbutter "Sara" (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR287f8p/
ainiiiiiiiii000 (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR25qck4/
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) >https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNR2ExCqE/
Theoddperson3 (ao3) | froggy_edits234 (tiktok) > https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS5eQCyBS/

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

> I just wanna make sure everyone knows what a red herring is 😈 (it's this)
> Also, I really like this chapter 🔎 (that's code for find the hint)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was slinking through the streets again, tailing Alfred. Everything around him was dark but he could see ahead so clearly...

*When suddenly Alfred collapsed and in the sheen of the street lights, Matthew could see blood growing in a puddle around him as he reacted like he did **that night**. The sounds pierced through the night and the terror of attracting something, **someone** made the darkness swallow all the light.*

Matthew ran, and the closer he got, the more his clothes became drenched. Because when he stopped in front of his brother and dropped to his knees...

His switchblade was in his hand and all of Alfred's limbs were hacked off...

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Luckily, Matthew's guess had been an educated one. Alfred came home at the usual time, all in one piece. Matthew couldn't ask for a better outcome, one that didn't have him sitting and waiting as his stomach churned into knots thinking about if he had made the wrong choice.

He hadn't been able to sleep once dawn broke. He wasn't even able to rest. Lying in bed did nothing to lull him back to sleep, so in an effort to distract himself while being productive, he turned to doing all his chores while he waited.

So the minute Alfred dragged himself in, Matthew stopped and turned to survey him with alert eyes. If *anything* happened, his brother's demeanour would show it.

"What?" Alfred drawled, rubbing his eyes with a big intake of breath.

"Nothing," Matthew glanced away, but looked back up when he saw Alfred duck into the kitchen. It was good that he wasn't going straight for his room because Matthew had questions he just needed to force out of his throat.

"How was it?" A pathetic opener, but he didn't want to just jump right into it and go after what he wanted. He'd been programmed better.

"Ugh, it was just-" Alfred rolled his eyes and threw a hand up in explanation. "Saw fuck all, that's what it was. 'pose that's a good thing but what's the bet someone *was* killed and I was nowhere near it and couldn't stop it."

That bet was a solid one but Matthew bit his tongue. There was no point in asking if Alfred thought it was pointless to be out from dusk to dawn. No sense in pointing out that there was no way the killer would be doing the same. That Alfred was just exhausting himself for no reason. But if Matthew suggested any of that, he knew how it would turn out. He wasn't in the mood for turbulence today so he just moved on to the next thing.

"Are you going to go to Ludwig's memorial today?" Of course, he knew the answer to that question. Alfred would never keep himself out of anything he decided was his business. But Matthew couldn't just outright say what he wanted, which was just to remind Alfred that he wanted to go and would go with him. But how could one naturally say 'oh by the way, you know I'll come along right?'

"Yeah, what kind of question is that?" Alfred reached into a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of pills. "Of course I'm fucking going. Are you asking because you're trying to talk me out of it?"

"No, why would I?!" Matthew stepped back, caught off guard by his brother's volatile attitude. Irritation flashed through him because why would his brother make such an assumption? It was almost offensive. He had to remember that Alfred was sleep deprived...

"Because maybe you're gonna be on my ass about me sleeping properly," Alfred huffed as he separated two pills and took them dry, before shaking the container in Matthew's face. "What do you think these are for?"

If he had to make a guess, probably for sleep. That was confirmed when he caught the label before Alfred put the container away.

"I was just- just asking, that's all," He hated the defensive feeling that took over him. He tried to push it aside as he scrambled to misdirect and make this all okay. He didn't want to worry about something like this today. "I was just going to ask if you heard anything-"

"*Pfft*, no. I haven't heard fucking anything from Gil or even from Feli..." Alfred took a breath. "But Toni did tell me some stuff about how they've both been asked to 'perform' because the Chief has something in mind."

Alfred winced and squinted as he opened the cabinet again to take some painkillers.

"I guess you haven't heard from them because they've been busy with preparing..." Matthew fisted his hands. What was he doing? He was falling back into the placating habit once again when he had already sworn off it! "Maybe you should go to bed and get as much sleep as you can. It's in the afternoon, so you'll be able to feel better by the time it's time to go?"

For a split second, it looked like Alfred was going to do just that, his body starting to move in that direction before he stopped.

"Ugh, actually lemme catch the news before I go to bed. I've gotta let some time for these pills to kick in anyways and at least the news is like a podcast," Alfred rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "Wait, what's the time?"

"The news will start soon," Matthew inferred. He had already been counting down for that. He didn't know if he was disappointed or not that Alfred would be joining him, though he should've expected it.

He sat on the couch and grabbed the remote, turning on the TV as Alfred slumped beside him and sagged heavily on the armrest as he leaned away from him.

When the news started, it was a surprise to see the Chief was making yet *another* announcement. Matthew quickly went through the possibilities. Was he going to tell the public about how the 'Trail Killer' was breaking curfew and picking off law enforcement? Or was it something more mundane, like an update about Ludwig's memorial?

"Fuck, why's he doing this now?" Alfred sat up straight, blinking his eyes as he determined to focus as much as possible. "Can't he wait for the memorial to say this shit?"

"Maybe he wants a certain type of reaction," Matthew suggested. It was a good move on the Chief's behalf. Whatever he was about to say, it was likely to be addressed to either the Trail Killer or the 'Trail Killer'... both of whom would be attending the memorial and most likely under crushing surveillance. Why not make them sweat to really make it easy to spot them?

"Good morning." The Chief was staring into the camera with his usual piercing stare. "This is not an update about our active case, as in the interest of making progress, it is vital to keep information classified unless it is in the public's best interest. As I'm sure you're all aware, today we will be holding a memorial to honour my late Grandson, Ludwig Beilschmidt, and all the others who lost their lives so cruelly, at the site where his life was taken."

"Is he just gonna harp on about this to make sure everyone goes?" Alfred huffed, standing up with a groan. "Fucking boring."

"However, Ludwig wasn't the only Grandson I lost to this monster, and so I am here to announce another project that has been progressing behind the scenes that I feel is right to unveil today."

"The fuck?" Alfred paused his shuffling off and slumped back down on the couch.

"That project is another memorial, one that pays tribute to the memory of my other grandson, Roderich Edelstein, who was murdered and will be mourned. It is also located where his life was cut short and I invite you to stop by and pay respects, as it is open right now and accessible to the public."

Alfred blinked slowly, eyebrows furrowed like he had to use his brain to hear every word. Matthew glanced back at the TV, looking at the Chief and seeing both grief and determination. It was certainly moving because it was so raw. Performance and grief had become one.

"This was made possible with the collaboration with local artists such as Feliciano Vargas..." The Chief began to trail off with a list that faded into the background as his words set in.

"Oh my God, what?" Alfred blinked at the TV screen before patting his pockets down while mumbling about his phone. It took him a moment to realise he didn't have it on him and he scrambled to get it from his room. There was a loud *thwack* sound as he apparently hit the doorframe from a lack of coordination.

Meanwhile, Matthew had his but didn't feel the urge to take it from his pocket. Not when everything he needed to know needed to be mulled over in his brain.

This was unexpected... yet so so intriguing. He wondered what those who made it saw in Roderich to have been motivated to complete it. Did they really know who Roderich was? The general public

certainly didn't, as they never met him personally and yet they'll never remember him for who he really was, only for who he was said to be.

Once again, Matthew was watching from the outside as the police set the hook and adjusted the line... waiting for the sinker.

When Alfred came back, loudly stumbling with no grace, Matthew saw he had an energy drink in hand. Obviously, he was planning the very same thing he was.

"I'll drive if you like," Matthew offered, knowing that not only was Alfred in no place to complain, but it would also stop him from just driving off and leaving Matthew to miss out.

He had to see this for himself.

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Alfred was quiet the entire drive. Matthew wondered just what those drugs were and if they had anything to do with it. It could just be that his brother *would've* been sleeping now and now it looked like he might not be sleeping at all. Especially since he brought an energy drink with him. There was no way Alfred was using that to chase the pills down...

The radio was off and there was no need for small talk. Which was nice because it let Matthew think over this new development without distraction. It occurred to him that the site would most likely be under surveillance... and it would be suspicious that he and Alfred were there so quickly...

Because, *shit*, his instinct about the Chief's announcement had been right. It was a calculated move, why wouldn't it be? The Chief had never actually specified *where* the location was on the news... the only people who knew where Roderich lived were his family, friends, and killer.

He just hoped he wasn't driving into a trap that could snare him too. But would it really be suspicious if they knew Roderich personally?

Matthew was both relieved and annoyed that there was already a crowd forming around Roderich's street. It made finding a park take longer than necessary. He supposed Roderich's death would've shaken the whole area, considering the illusion of safety such a nice neighbourhood radiated. Neighbours talked and so it was plausible that everyone would've known the right place to go, so it didn't mean much when it came to secrecy. Plus, word of mouth was formidable and everything spread like fire on the internet. People would be swarming regardless of the Chief's omission or not. Matthew just didn't hear about any of it because he hadn't used his phone while driving, so he was oblivious to how the public responded to this.

Or if they *could*, given the restricted channels to talk about the Trail Killer and related topics... but Matthew was sure that with enough digging, he'd find new places that popped up in place of the old ones. People would want to protect themselves and gossip.

Despite being completely passive and like a zombie the entire car ride, Alfred sprang into action the minute the engine shut off. With a sigh and grunt of effort, he jumped out of the car and started weaving through the crowd to see what they were all gawking at.

"Alfred!" Matthew called out, but the sound disappeared into the crowd, so he darted after his brother before Alfred could do the same. It felt awkward to weave through the gaps of groups, and he reflexively apologised to everyone he brushed past while never losing sight of Alfred.

When he caught up to Alfred, they were right in front of the brick wall standing as a fence in front where Roderich lived... and presumably died. Alfred stared intensely at the scene in front of them and Matthew wondered if he was even seeing it... or something else. There was no need to wonder if this was where Roderich had been displayed... where the Copycat traumatised his brother.

The wall had been painted over and transformed into a mural, obviously what the Chief had the local artists collaborate on. It looked beautiful with themes of white flowers and music. The liveliness wasn't just confined to the wall, especially when the street below was adorned with all sorts of offerings, surrounding a framed portrait of Roderich with flowers.

Matthew took it all in before glancing around. All of this was to invite people in... and while it was a grand display, he really hoped that Ludwig's memorial would be better. It would have to be, considering how it had been a while in the making despite being pushed. Add the fact that he was a police officer and a turning point for the case...

Matthew tried to appear nonchalant as his eyes roamed and took inventory of the scene. There were a few cameras overhead, protruding from the surrounding buildings, but he had no way of knowing if they were there before. But when it seemed they were all pointed this way and covering every angle of that memorial, and suspiciously clean and unweathered, it couldn't be a coincidence.

Matthew turned back to the wall in front of him and placed a hand on Alfred's shoulder. He had to assume those cameras were being watched *live* due to the nature of the case and he couldn't act suspicious.

Would the Copycat think the same thing? Or would he slip up and forget that the world was a stage and *he* was performing, not just an audience member and that this was all for him?

Because the Copycat *would* be here... somewhere. He'd have to be. Why wouldn't he want to see this? Once Matthew started getting traction, all he wanted to see was how everyone reacted.

"Alfred...?" Matthew had to half yell to be heard over the groups of people in the background, their chatter making it hard for Matthew to put care into his voice.

"What?" Alfred grumbled, but his eyes didn't drift away.

"Alfred..." Matthew weighed it up and sighed. "Try to act normal, there's cameras."

"What?" Alfred blinked and Matthew just knew he was about to look around to find them.

"Don't look!" He grit his teeth. He wanted Alfred to stop feeling so miserable and acting so suspicious, but now he just made it worse. "It's probably so they make sure no one messes with the memorial... you know how some people are, they just like to ruin things for others."

Alfred made a grumbled noise of understanding as his expression darkened, glowering at the wall in front of them. Matthew's hand felt foreign resting on his brother's shoulder. Everything that used to come to him easily just blanked from his mind as he had to sift through ideas of what to do or say because "I'm sorry" just wouldn't cut it. Not when people always demanded *more* and it wasn't like Matthew had a frame of reference beyond grappling in the void.

"Just don't be suspicious or they might know that you were out at night," Matthew said reluctantly. If Alfred had a breakdown here or acted strangely while looking at the memorial... who knows

what the police would read it as. Even if it wasn't the worst case of reading it as a sign of guilt, they'd still have questions...

Alfred nodded and Matthew still couldn't swallow the urge to be comforting. This was when something was usually expected of him, when he was expected to hold people with arms that weren't even strong enough to hold himself...

"I just can't wrap my head around why people do this," Alfred muttered.

"Do what?"

"This," Alfred gestured at the wall. Matthew glanced at it as he considered what that meant.

Did he mean why people who didn't even know Roderich feel bad for him? Matthew could see it if he really thought about it.

"To be fair, I'm so fucking tired." Alfred chugged a big mouthful of his energy drink, leaving some dribbling down his chin. "I can't wrap my head around much..."

"That's okay," Matthew said, glancing around and taking the whole scene in.

It was strange that it was still invigorating. Even if he didn't do this, he still did it by proxy. Someone killed Roderich because *he* inspired them. He hadn't inspired anyone before. And this scene was inspirational in itself because clearly, actions make an impact. Impacts were heard. Matthew couldn't wait to see how Ludwig's memorial compared. Would they be taking the same measures to catch him there as the Copycat?

And not that he thought about it, he couldn't wait to see what his graveyard inspired once he revealed that. Would it blow up to be something 'big'? That seemed obvious. Because even if it was mostly full of people who caused themselves to become homeless and were volatile towards everyone in their lives, burning every hand that reached for them, it wasn't about them. It was the message. It was the meaning. The shock. And as it was apparent today, people who didn't even know Roderich and know him as a pretentious asshole would care. Would say that because someone was dead, they shouldn't be and never deserved it and whoever killed them was all bad and never vindicated.

Matthew didn't realise how he was getting sucked into ruminating when he realised he had spotted a familiar face. One that he couldn't immediately place...

Basch was here, his features harder than usual as he glanced around with sharp eyes and a scowl. Matthew hadn't been seen staring so he continued to watch as Basch scanned the area, appearing to take note of everyone in the crowd and then glancing around the buildings above-

"Oh hey! What are you doing here?" Alfred's voice doing a 180 made Matthew flinch. He was back to his casual and sociable self but after a split second, Matthew realised it wasn't directed at Basch.

"We came to bring our support!" Tino smiled softly, though it looked like he was stifling a yawn.

"That's not what happened," Emil muttered, though it was hard to know if that was a statement or a complaint.

"Come on Emil, don't look so grumpy," Mathias poked Emil's cheek, making him frown deeper.

Even if it was only the three of them, it seemed Alfred was still determined to play the role of being the hero instead of admitting he wasn't up to it today. Matthew let out a quiet sigh before glancing back and realising he lost sight of Basch.

Instead of letting an awkward silence stretch on, Alfred had to speak.

"Did you guys just get out of bed or something?" Alfred pointed at Tino's shirt. All three of them were wearing band tees of the death metal genre variety and dressed almost too casually to fit the scene right beside them.

"Basically," Emil said flatly, only to be ignored.

"This is Ensiferum!" Tino brightened up slightly, not too much given the circumstances, but he seemed happy to talk about music. "They're a Finnish folk metal band and I love them."

"Okay, that sounds cool, we'll have to listen to that together sometime," Alfred said, though Matthew really doubted that would happen. Clearly, his brother was just making plans he'd *like* to happen. "What about that one?"

"What, Amon Amarth?" Mathias perked up when Alfred pointed to his shirt. "No, but this is my favourite album from them. Have you ever listened to Jomsviking? The third song definitely has the best guitar."

"Oh really?" Alfred took another swig of his drink. "Man, I wouldn't even be able to tell you what my favourite band or singer or album is... What about you, Emil?"

"It's just a shirt. Brother gave it to me and he'd bug me if he didn't see me wearing it." Emil sighed before muttering. "He's in a shitty enough mood as it is."

"Lukas? Where's he? And uh," Alfred's eyes seemed to glaze as his brain struggled to produce speech on demand. "Berwald. Where're they?"

"Lukas has been real moody lately, seems like he'd rather sleep in," Mathias shrugged. "Berwald's got this new super secret gig that he won't tell us much about. I knew he was a bummer but a gatekeeper? Lame. Especially when he won't even let me guess!"

Matthew noted that both Tino and Emil gave Mathias a look with a degree of exasperation and disappointment, tipping him off that Mathias was likely off the mark with his light assertion. He glanced around for Basch again but couldn't see him, though he did note the street was becoming more packed.

"Lukas is looking after Peter," Tino corrected. "Since Berwald has been working a lot more lately and I couldn't bring Peter here..."

"It does suck that Berwald has to work today," Mathias sighed. "I mean, who has work on a Saturday? I know he'd want to come see this."

Tino's gaze drifted towards the brightly coloured wall with a heavy aura and the conversation faltered a bit.

"So how's Peter anyways?" Alfred quickly said.

"He's good, he won't shut up about Valhalla, though," Mathias answered, though his tone was one of endearment.

"That's because you told him that's where his brother went," Emil added.

"I was trying to cheer him up!" Mathias replied, his attention being derailed. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell him Roderich went there."

"Well, he's as good as he can be after what happened with his brother," Tino sighed as he smiled weakly at Alfred. "But his therapist said he's doing well and developing normally. Plus, we all give him plenty of attention."

"Alright, that's great!" Alfred smiled and gave a thumbs up. "I'll have to stop by and see him soon!"

Matthew really wondered when that would happen, and why the offer to do so had never been handed to him. Why he had never been told anything about Peter to begin with?

Suddenly, another voice was joining the mix, one that announced itself with a familiar trilling noise.

"Guys! You made it!" Feliciano bounced up to Alfred and basically jumped on him as he wrapped his arms around him. Alfred only had enough energy to turn in surprise and was not prepared for the contact, letting out an *oof* as he staggered to support them both.

"Fuck, Feli," Alfred huffed in surprise. "Mornin'. Uh, how comes I didn't hear 'bout this?"

"Hmm? Oh, cus the Chief said I shouldn't tell anyone and made me promise. I probably should've told you though, cus he didn't make me pinky promise."

Antonio and Kiku were right behind the Italian, with energy that did not match. Which was understandable, considering it wasn't even eight in the morning and they were standing beside a street memorial for someone they all knew.

"What's this? A crossover episode?" Alfred grinned, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"We came to pay our respects, as the Chief said," Kiku said. Matthew noticed his posture wasn't quite as refined as it usually was and there were bags under his eyes. Was a surprise to Kiku too, or if he went hunting the whole night knowing he would have to accompany his friend here in support right after?

"*Si*, what kind of amigo would I be if I didn't?" Antonio's tone was flat as he fidgeted with a bouquet of red frilly flowers.

"Shit, right," Alfred muttered to himself before speaking louder. "Uh, how are you man? I know you and Rod had some history- well no shit everyone here had history but uh," Alfred was clearly too tired to articulate. "How are you doing upstairs, y'know?"

Clearly, he was trying to reference mental health. Matthew didn't think that was a sly way to go about it, but it really didn't matter. Antonio gave a small smile all the same.

"I'm fine. The history is history but it's still sad. I never expected..." Antonio trailed off. "I thought no one else was going to... it's hard. I can't stop thinking about it."

"Yeah, me too," Feliciano's face contorted with sorrow. "But at least I got to help with this memorial, because Roderich used to love doing art with me and now-"

When Felciano choked up, Antonio was quick to pull him into a hug while Kiku put an arm on his shoulder.

"Yeah man... I get what ya mean," Alfred mumbled, eyes glazed over as he glanced at the wall and fisted his energy drink. "I kinda thought... well, hoped, that no one else was gonna die."

"I thought the curfew was working," Feliciano wailed. "Ludwig would be so upset-" He cut off with a wet choke.

"Hey, where's Gilbert?" Mathias peered past them into the crowd. "Is he coming?"

"Roderich was his cousin, right?" Tino's question was more of a formality. He already knew the answer and his sympathetic face said it.

"He wanted to stay home," Kiku disclosed. "My apologies."

"It's not your fault, amigo." Antonio muttered, his voice having a bitter twinge to it.

Matthew assumed that the albino was still being difficult at home. But it would make sense that he didn't want to come this morning. Gilbert probably had a long night too, wandering around without progress. He probably didn't want to face the reality here. Though Matthew wished Gilbert did come, if only so he could see how he was holding up. Sure, Gilbert would make a scene, but it wasn't like Matthew had to deal with any second-hand embarrassment from it.

"Nonno's home with him so he's not all alone," Feliciano said, sounding really miserable. "But I really wish he came because I wanted him to see what I did... a photo isn't the same."

The Italian's gaze lingered past the group, towards where strangers were taking selfies with the memorial and snapping lots of pictures of it. Matthew glanced between that scene and Alfred's friends. Surely that pissed them off, right? It made him slightly annoyed, though he struggled to articulate why.

"Plus Nonno was going to come..." Feliciano continued before sighing. "But that's okay! He can see it later when not so many people are around!"

"I'm not sure that's going to happen any time soon," Tino added sympathetically.

"Yeah, the amount of people lingering around Arthur's grave is insane," Mathias added, eyes darting to Alfred. "Sorry."

"Yeah I jus' don't think 'bout it," Alfred grimaced, then huffed in bitter amusement. "Got so much other shit to think 'bout anyways that it's pretty easy to get distracted."

"Why are you distracted?" Everyone jumped when another voice joined the conversation and a heavy hand fell on Alfred's shoulder.

"***Fuck! Ivan!***" Alfred's reaction was almost angry as he almost dropped his drink. After a split second he recovered, but there was an observable lingering annoyance and guardedness to his movements. "*How the fuck can a guy so fuckin' big sneak up like that?!*"

"It is talent. Just like you have talent for swearing."

"Well, I *fucking don't like being fucking snuck up on*!" Alfred retorted. "You gave me a fucking heart attack you fucking *asshole*!"

There was an awkward air between everyone else witnessing the interaction and from their wary glances and tense posture, Matthew could tell that the others were just trying to think up reasons to wander off now. Considering how friendly Alfred was acting just before, snapping like this was not expected.

"I have come to see memorial, for support," Ivan's unnatural smile was plastered on his face despite the circumstances. "Are you sad? I will give you big hug to make it all better."

"I don't think a hug's gonna fix this, dude," Alfred muttered, pressing a hand firmly over his heart.

Ivan ignored him and hugged him anyway, earning him a squawk as he leaned in closer to Alfred, voice dropping and making Matthew strain to hear. "And you do not check phone, it is very annoying. I need to tell you that last night, more police were killed. You were right about Trail Killer. He is very hungry..."

"*Fuck*, really?" Alfred's face was one of shock and his volume did not match Ivan's at all "Wait, how do you know this?"

"I told you, talent, da?" Ivan leaned back.

Alfred just repeatedly ran his hands over his mouth as he became twitchy. Ivan's face didn't change at all as he grabbed Alfred's wrists and forced his hands down.

"It is okay, okay?" Ivan stated. "The good guys always win, da?"

"Do they?" Alfred scoffed, his voice shaky and eyes drifting past everything. "Cus sometimes, *they fucking don't*."

"We will," Ivan's expression was just as intense as his tone.

Once again, Matthew was amazed by how much he could overhear when no one thought twice about him. He glanced around to keep track of the others, wondering just who else would show up. Emil was texting on his phone and Matthew couldn't tell if he looked bored or uncomfortable. Mathias and Tino were inspecting the art and the offerings while seemingly discussing the public turnout with some other members of the public. Antonio was cooing something to Feliciano while he cried and stared at Roderich's portrait... the same portrait Kiku was staring at with both a mournful and determined look.

"I fucking hope so..." Alfred muttered, putting a hand over his stomach while offering his energy drink to Ivan. "Want this?"

"It is putrid American chemicals, da?" Ivan looked at it for a moment before taking it anyway. "It would be better with vodka."

"Dude, come on- *dude*-"

Ivan slipped out a flask from his coat and tipped some kind of clear liquid into the mouth of the can. It would be reasonable to assume that it was vodka.

"I'm not drinking that," Alfred protested.

"*Nyet*, is for me," Ivan sighed as he skulled the rest. "I slept before mission last night. I will be fine until after memorial."

"Good for you, man," Alfred sighed before rubbing his hands down his face. "I don't think I can last that long. That drink just made me feel like shit."

"Then you should go home, sleep," Ivan stated as he gripped Alfred's shoulder in a way that anyone else would see he wasn't making a suggestion. If it wasn't for these extenuating circumstances, Alfred might not have picked up on that. Instead he glanced over at the others and Ivan followed his gaze.

"They will be fine. I will look after them for you. Make them feel not alone like you do," Ivan's smile was cheery and Alfred didn't see any alarm in it. Lucky him.

"Yeah 'kay... maybe tell 'em that I'm gonna do my washin' or dishes or some shit... I feel like I should be with 'em so.. y'know. Tell 'em imma definitely hang with 'em after... *what's the fucking word?* Ludwig's thing."

Ivan just smiled and shoved Alfred by the shoulders, turning him away and encouraging him to leave. But because Alfred was exhausted and unsteady, he collided with Matthew.

Matthew didn't need to say anything. He couldn't think of anything to say and his mouth was too dry to open anyway. He just pulled the car keys from his pocket and with an arm on Alfred's back, started leading him back to the car. He didn't really want to leave, not when he wanted to really take the scene in and try to see if his instincts could spot the Copycat. But there wasn't a way he could advocate for staying when Alfred was like this. It would only make him look like an asshole. He'd just have to take this snippet he got here and enjoy it.

But he knew he would have a second chance during the memorial. *That* was something he still looked forward to.

Matthew still briefly scanned the crowd again, if only out of habits formed a long time ago, when he realised he was staring at that familiar face again. Matthew had been so caught up in eavesdropping that he didn't even notice Basch eavesdropping.

That made him falter. He knew that Basch was still around- or well, he didn't know that. Basch could've left. Yet here he was, lingering by them without saying hi.

Maybe Matthew was jumping to conclusions with the use of the word 'eavesdropping'. Maybe there was nothing going on. Basch had never been a people person; he couldn't be polite to save his life and maybe this was just a case of him having conflicted feelings and didn't want to socialise. Matthew had to admit he may be biased as he had conflicted feelings about Basch. On one hand, Basch left him and everyone alone, but on the other hand, the way he spoke and treated people was *abrupt*. Matthew didn't like it, even if it wasn't personal. It seemed that Basch only came out of the woodworks now because of Roderich... he doubted he'd see much of the Swiss man apart from this.

Not even on the streets... though that may be something to consider. If Matthew couldn't have Roderich... No. He was still sticking to his plan. He had to remove the Copycat before anything else.

Alfred saw him too and even though Matthew was pushing him towards the car, he still stopped in his tracks and put on a smile as he gave a little wave.

"'ey man, how's it goin'?"

Basch turned his head towards them, face flat and eyes almost glaring. "How do you think?"

"Right, right, I jus' meant that- y'know-" Alfred was scrambling as he backtracked that Matthew felt bad for him. He knew what it was like to desperately want and *need* to please everyone, to say the right thing to make them happy. He thought his brother didn't need to do that but right now it seemed that Alfred was about to cave to that pressure.

"Um, sorry man, I haven't been myself for a while... um, Arthur's grave got leaked and I haven't been sleeping well... so..." Alfred mumbled out. "Um, good to see you though. I mean, I'm sorry for your loss. Give me a call if you ever need anything."

Then Alfred jerked away as he walked with purpose and Matthew quickly trailed after him. Not before letting his eyes linger on Basch as he tried to make sense of his face. And because even if he was sour, Matthew wasn't afraid of him and wasn't going to cave so quickly. He wasn't going to flinch away or he was a coward.

Clearly, Basch wasn't here to talk and that unwanted conversation was better left dropped. That didn't stop Alfred from angrily rambling under his breath all the way to the car, or then sitting with his arms crossed and blank eyes staring out the window the whole trip home.

Chapter End Notes

Here's some cool things people made!
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRkoAESy/
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRkoyXDL/
Ashtjmm (ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRkoUQGU/
'Iris' | quiza_soy_iris (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRkojF37/
canafan (Guest) | felidalaxy (Tumblr) > https://www.tumblr.com/felidalaxy/806235258405126144/matthew-williams-aka-the-trail-killer-fanart-for
Theoddperson3 (Ao3) > https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSaBHLwMj/
EvilKitty37 (Ao3) | cherry.bonbon0 (tiktok) > https://www.tiktok.com/@cherry.bonbon0/photo/7599420601643699477?_r=1&_t=ZS-93NQxDM5x3M
Ashtjmm (Ao3) | se4gll.ash (tiktok)> https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRS4LNao/

An author's note under ch36 said this fic shouldn't exceed 200+ thousand words. Let me clarify, it definitely will.
Also I have a feeling I told someone it would be 10ish chapters until the Copycat reveal. Uh, scratch that estimate, I honestly don't know how long it'll be. In my mind it's 10 steps until then but I can't guarantee they get a single chapter each. My bad but I'm sure more chapters isn't something to mourn

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

> In all honesty I wanted *some* conflict in this chapter... but I think I may have taken it too far. Oh well, enjoy
> Espcially you rawrrawr8080, happy birthday 😌

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was no relief, no reprieve. Yet that was the least of his mounting concerns despite how distracting the ache in his back was becoming.

Alaric had to excuse himself for what must be the 10th time since arriving at the memorial site early this morning to pace along the alley of the grocery store while ruminating. Though excusing himself at *this time* was about more than an ache in his back. He wanted to say he wasn't surprised but he considered a realist and that this should've been expected.

There was an hour until the main event and none of the pills he had taken really took full effect. If he took inventory of his body, there were more aches than not and he would've thought that, given this had been going on for so long, he would've just become numbly adjusted to it by now. It was a real pity he hadn't.

He let out a long exhale, pushing his hair to rest on his back and grimacing when he pulled his hand away and saw way too many strands of hair caught between his fingers. He kept telling himself it was only strands, not *chunks*. His hair had been a source of pride for too long and while he had expected it to grey in his old age, he didn't quite identify as old enough to justify how silvery it looked now.

Mind over matter. The only matter that mattered was the matters that he had to attend to. Not that he had many to *personally* attend to right now, as he had a team to designate duties to. But it left him feeling stretched thin in different directions when he had to oversee the completion anyway.

The new letter from the Copycat sat heavy in his breast pocket. He had read it many times already, and he already written up an assertion to submit to evidence, but he still wasn't satisfied. Not because he was paranoid and obsessive, but because he had literally been so short for time. With the memorial scheduled and his inevitable admittance for assistance, he needed to have it ready quicker than he would've liked. But none the matter, he was hoping to have a spare moment to re-read the letter again and see if there was any conclusion he missed-

But he perished the thought when he heard aggressive grunts and cursing from outside the alleyway.

The cherry on top of his already crushing workload was he had to manage *them*. Correction, *him*, the cause of his current grief. That was not a task he could delegate to anyone else, as it was his own burden to shoulder. He knew it was going to be a challenge to have Gilbert cooperate again, but he had been left with so few options that it was hardly a decision in the end.

After a moment to roll his head and square his shoulders, Alaric emerged from the alley.

They had barely arrived ten minutes ago - Gilbert, Feliciano and Antonio, as expected, along with their emotional support tagalong Augustus... Honestly, he should've expected it. Alaric was just thankful there weren't *more*. What happened at Ludwig's funeral was not acceptable and he detested how Gilbert's friends encouraged his disrespect and outrageous behaviour. Thinking about how Gilbert's company silently encouraged him to be rude to his own grandfather with them as witnesses made a vein in his head throb.

But luckily, there was only one annoying extra today, and it was someone whom the Chief knew had respect for him and wanted to see the same results as he did. Alaric had already taken the other man aside and strictly told him that he couldn't obstruct anything, while imploring him to help keep things under control. Namely, their grandsons, whom Augustus at least agreed to and notably did not go out of his way to push any kind of 'help' on Alaric. Good.

But it seemed that even Augustus' charisma was no match for Gilbert when he was lashing out.

Which was what Gilbert was currently doing, his face contorted as he snarled and paced, muttering obscenities with a rough tone.

When they had first arrived altogether, along with other civilians, Alaric had already been there with his investigation team. This included the new hire who he thought was perfect, but he should've expected that Gilbert would have thoughts otherwise. In his defence, how could he even consider something so moronic? Alaric started the introductions so they were all acquainted with each other and the team, and that's how Gilbert learnt that "Ludwig's" position had been filled... by someone who was 'basically Ludwig but with glasses.'

Gilbert was the only one who felt that way, of course, and continued to carry on with delusion even when Felciano started crying and saying he was being unfair. Especially when he began to growl, saying Alaric 'should've told him,' to which the Chief responded with a stern statement that it was *not* Gilbert's place to know about police or investigative affairs.

Alaric always knew his grandson was explosive and emotional. Gilbert, to his credit, had really tried to push it down and be professional when he first arrived. Alaric had even complimented him on his appropriate choice of attire as he briefed them on what they needed to know about the proceedings. But when 'Ludwig's replacement' informed him that the package Alaric had been waiting for all day arrived at the precinct, everything spiralled from there.

It made his blood pressure rise just thinking about it, about how Gilbert would dare accuse him of *replacing* Ludwig. That was not the case and reasoning with him was a waste of time because his grandson just couldn't conceive that filling a *job position* was only a matter of necessity. It made him wonder how Gilbert could stick his head in the sand instead of trying to *think* something through.

So instead of briefing the officers and military personnel for the upcoming public event, he had to deal with *that*. Even now, when Alaric had left with the instruction that Gilbert *act* his age and stop acting like he was being forced to drink poison just by being in his presence.

There was no point appealing to reason. Not then and not now. Yet like a well-travelled road, Alaric found himself on it yet again. Even while he knew that Gilbert was just lashing out and challenging him, acting no better than the child he'd always been, Alaric couldn't help but rise to the occasion.

All the civilian volunteers had been instructed to sit in the police bus parked in front of the temporary stage, one constructed for the event where Alaric would unveil the statue covered with a sheet. He already caught Gilbert trying to peek under it and now it seemed that Alaric would have to remind his grandson to focus *again* as he was pacing the length of the bus. The paper Alaric had handed him was crumpled in his hand.

"I have left you alone and given you the space you wanted up until now," Alaric's voice was stern as he stood in Gilbert's path. "And now, when I ask just one thing from you, you can't even do it?"

"I am!" Gilbert scowled, swinging his arm up to hold the fisted paper. "I've already memorised it!"

Alaric seriously doubted that, but he knew to pick his battles.

"Fine. Then there's only one thing I need from you now," Alaric should be lecturing Gilbert on the importance of not going off script and improvising, but more importantly than that; "I need you to pull yourself together and be composed."

Gilbert had his head in the game when interviewed about receiving the letter from Roderich's killer. Alaric just needed that level of professionalism and, more importantly, the understanding that they were working towards a shared goal.

"Why?" Gilbert scoffed, putting his hands on his hips. "Because you hate seeing me like this?"

"*No*, because-"

"Because the fucking investigation!" Gilbert snarled, jerking his head away. "Yeah, I'm not surprised. Something else always came first."

"I ask you for composure and you give me the opposite," Alaric just sighed sharply. He had heard a loud slam only moments earlier and had to assume that Gilbert's company and the other volunteers were still in the comfort and privacy of the bus. Now the door was cracked open to a degree and Alaric could tell by their faces they were unwilling to come out and interfere. Good, Gilbert needed to hear the truth without someone stepping in to protect him from consequences. "Part of my job is to read behaviour and I see yours for what it is. I can see past the fight you're trying to pick."

"*I'm not trying to pick a fight*!" Gilbert argued. "I just think this is fucking stupid, that you can make me and Feli do this again when you didn't get *shit* from Lud's funeral!"

"You have no right to impose judgment on this investigation," Alaric narrowed his eyes. The personnel around the parking lot looked like they wanted to make themselves scarce and it Feliciano clearly wanted to do the same. He was rocking on the spot like he didn't know if he wanted to stay or flee back inside. Antonio and Augustus were there for him, but it looked like they were just waiting for the right moment to jump in and spare Gilbert.

Alaric figured that would be the best course of action because his grandson would *not* concede and he didn't want this to drag out much longer.

"Yeah, because you think I'm stupid, right?" Gilbert cocked his head aggressively as he took a step forward. "Ludwig was the smart one, not me. I bet if you had to choose-"

"*I never said that*," Alaric held his ground, looking down with a sharp look. "I don't know why you insist on taking your grief out on me, but I assure you, this stops now."

"Or fucking what? It's not like you don't take your grief out on me!"

"I've done no such thing," Alaric said sternly. Sure, Gilbert may feel like Alaric couldn't respond in the way he wanted, but there was no need to exaggerate. When Bonnefoy died, Alaric had Ludwig extend an offer to use police therapy resources, something which Gilbert thought unnecessary and completely neglected to use. "Cease your projection. I have always made sure you had resources-"

"You don't like to hear it because it's true! And you're ruining everything for Ludwig too! Why do we have to turn something honouring Lud into a game when it didn't work the first time?"

Alaric's teeth were grinding. He knew he should walk away and let Gilbert compose himself while he did the same, but he couldn't let the implication slide that he was dancing with the definition of insanity.

"You will *not* put words in my mouth and you will *not* read into intentions that aren't there." Alaric hardened his voice. "Let me spell it out for you since you cannot follow basic instructions without digging your heels in the ground. Comparing those present at both events will provide a shorter list to work with and we're prepared for this event by having measures in place-"

"*Why* can't you just talk normal for once? You're not on TV right now you know!"

"I don't know what you want from me," Alaric growled. "But you will *not* get it acting like this."

"I don't want anything from you! I want you to leave me alone like you did before, when Lud was still here and that was enough for you!"

Alaric glanced away abruptly, jutting his jaw as the ache became unbearable.

"Gilbert," Augustus reached hesitantly for him. "Come on, your grandfather has a lot of work to do."

"Exactly, amigo, you won't have to be around him once this is over." Antonio appealed. "This isn't a game, it's for your brother, too. It's for everyone."

Feliciano didn't say anything, not when he was curled up tightly and watching apprehensively.

"You guys just want me to shut up and make this easier for you. I'm not stupid," Gilbert growled before turning on Alaric. "Can't you just go away? You smell of gross old man, you know that?"

Alaric's face hardened more. This was just a waste of time and he knew he should walk away, but he just couldn't leave well enough alone.

"I raised you better than this," he stated, knowing that not rising to his grandson's grief would just make him more frustrated. But giving in would only be enabling it and that was something he couldn't do.

Gilbert just glared, fisting the sheet as his expression trembled in what could either be anger or a breakdown.

He never wanted to put his grandson under such stress or ask for so much when he was clearly not capable of it. If Alaric weren't so thoroughly swamped and overwhelmed with work, he'd certainly be looking into legal revenues of how to deal with Gilbert. Clearly, he wasn't getting the help he needed and Alaric's direct intervention was only inviting resistance. Case in point being Gilbert's

resentment that he had been handcuffed, while not admitting any responsibility or that the act was necessary. One of the first comments Gilbert made upon arriving was comparing the treatment and he couldn't understand why Alaric stood by it.

Alaric rubbed his face, pushing his fingers into the corner of his eyes as he thought about literally everything else he needed to do. His vision was strained and blurred and he could feel the eye drops weighing down his pocket. He would have to use them soon, but he ignored them and glanced at the others.

Really, he would've preferred that none of them be here, but it was too late to do anything about that now and if they hadn't retreated to the back of the bus with the other civilians, then why would they now? When he saw Augustus arrive, Alaric knew he couldn't ask him to leave without causing an argument with Gilbert. But it seemed that was inevitable.

"I'm really really sorry about Gil, it's not his fault!" Feliciano began to ramble and Alaric, just raised a hand to stop him from this unnecessary tangent. But apparently that was the wrong move because it just set Gilbert off again.

"Leave him alone!" Gilbert slapped that hand down. "Do you want to make Feli cry again?! Will that make you happy?"

"Gilbert-" Antonio chuckled nervously while Augustus roped Feliciano into a hug because now he *was* crying.

"Refrain yourself," Alaric snatched Gilbert's wrist and held it tight. This insolence was quickly pushing him to his breaking point and he couldn't help but question if having him here was even worth it. "Will you, or will you not be able to behave today?"

"Why do you have to say it like that?" Gilbert yanked his wrist, and Alaric's stomach churned when he managed to pull himself free without much of a fight. "*Yeah*, I'll do what *you* want. *Yeah*, I'll act like some doll you can just take out of storage and dress up and do whatever the hell you want to with it! So what's the fucking problem?"

"Your temperament is the problem. I understand this is hard for you-"

"No shit! My baby brother is dead and you're just doing whatever the fuck you want even if it's not what he would've wanted!"

"Regardless of whether or not he wanted a memorial in his name," Alaric spoke slowly through his teeth, "it's what he *deserves*. It's a means of remembrance and gratitude for what he did. Would you rather his contributions go unacknowledged? All I'm asking is that you stand with family-"

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Gilbert held the paper to Alaric's face. He slapped it to make an abrupt noise, making Alaric glare in warning. "I wouldn't fucking say this! He wouldn't want his memory get turned into a fucking game show!"

"We are going in circles..." Alaric slapped his grandson's hand down. There was no point in just demanding that Gilbert have some damn resilience. "Why do you think I insisted we have a private burial? I am not the monster you make me out to be. You think I only care about the investigation and not for Ludwig?"

Gilbert just growled, swinging his hands around as he flexed them and crumpled the paper more before dragging them through his hair forcefully, over and over.

It could not be more apparent that Gilbert hated him and didn't want to be anywhere near him. Alaric couldn't say he *didn't* understand the feeling and knew it would be wrong to say it was *mutual*, yet somehow he was way more composed about it because he had a job to do and wouldn't lose sight of it. And his job was made incredibly difficult because his eldest just lacked the perseverance to be of any help.

"Gilbert," Augustus stepped out of the bus, apparently unwilling to sit and watch any longer. "I know it's not fair but you can get through this. Just think that Ludwig's watching over..."

Alaric glanced away with what would pass as an eye roll as Augustus started *cooing* at Gilbert, as if he were a boy and not a man. Alaric would never be left guessing as to why the Vargas boys turned out as spineless as they did. Even as Augustus reached for him, Gilbert grimaced and froze for only a brief moment as his eyes watered. Clearly unreceptive to every hand that reaches for him.

Sometimes it was just best to let nature take its course. Alaric just sighed and turned away. He wasn't going to say anything to exacerbate the problem or to contribute to this madness. He had faith that Gilbert could produce results; he had to trust it after seeing him at Ludwig's funeral. Though considering everything else he's seen from Gilbert, he didn't have much faith in anything else.

Around the parking lot were a few other cars belonging to other police and military personnel. Originally, they had been discussing their approach for the event in the bus before Alaric had ordered them out and asked them to stay on standby. When Augustus got on the bus he asked about the many monitors stationed inside and Alaric dismissed the question entirely and redirected to their briefing. He made a mental note to return to brief his task force before the event started. That his first priority was and the only thing on his mind was getting that package, which surely would be delivered any moment now.

Until then, he had to get back to work.

The investigation team had dispersed through the parking lot and were helping the regular officers set up the thousands upon thousands of chairs for the estimated attendance. Alaric did not envy that tedious job at all and set off to round up his team.

He had only travelled the length of the bus when he heard the sounds of Gilbert's instability grow louder. He cast a look over his shoulder to see Gilbert almost frothing as his fist made impact with the bus as he glared at his grandfather.

"I wish I could punch you in your fucking, unawesome, stuck-up face!" Gilbert spat, even as his friends frantically tried to grab him and appeal to him.

"*You wouldn't dare*." Alaric's face darkened, letting intimidation radiate off of him as his voice came out sharp and loud. No matter how aggravated Gilbert was, he always wore his heart on his sleeve. Even if he continued to bear his teeth like a dog, it was obvious that he was affected because he recoiled. "Do *not* treat police property like that. I will resort to measures you will not like if you don't get yourself under control!"

Alaric could still feel the piercing hatred linger in Gilbert's restrained glare, so he turned on his heel and kept walking away. He was ready to move on from this and get back to something *actually*

useful for making any progress, but first he had to delegate this and he needed a trustworthy officer because not only was his new hire *still* not back with the package, he would not make a good choice considering Gilbert's feelings towards his brother's 'replacement'.

Luckily, Alaric found another officer and approached without hesitation.

"Sir?"

"If he appears to be a real threat to himself or others, handcuff him and take him to the station," Alaric declared. "Use force if necessary. I won't have him cause a scene or damage property. Just keep it discreet."

While the media was not a problem because he had them all in a legal chokehold of cooperation, there was still the public, who were the most stupid jurors any police officer could encounter. If they saw someone being arrested, who knows what rumours would spread. Though it brought some comfort to know it would all be tackled easily with the efforts of the media. An indirect chokehold.

Without waiting for confirmation because clarification was really unnecessary, Alaric just paced away. He eyed the covered statue, the sleek cloth covering it. There were more important things to deal with than a childish tantrum. He rubbed his eyes raw as he ducked into the alleyway again and pulled some eye drops from his pocket.

While it wasn't ideal, he could do the memorial without Gilbert. Both killers would be disappointed, but they'd be disappointed and caught on tape regardless. Especially the Copycat, who had already addressed a letter to his remaining grandson...

It was only on a need-to-know basis that the monitors in the bus were connected to cameras stationed all around and going to show every angle of the event. Alaric was prepared to view the recording every day for weeks if it meant getting a lead. Because he would be getting a lead. There was no way he wouldn't with the measures he had in place and the level of preparation he had.

Perhaps Gilbert's removal wouldn't hinder the case at all.

Chapter End Notes

Last chance to guess who that new hire is. I could've put it in this chapter because omitting it seemed slightly unnatural, but oh well. Some of you have been picking up every bread crumb I've been putting down (for better or worse 😅 you guys are clever)

Here's some more things this fic inspired!
Ashtjmm (ao3) | (tiktok) > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRDfAJLs/
Kiwi_fruity (Ao3) | Kiwi made of Plutonium (spotify) > https://open.spotify.com/playlist/33ddJqkPrJxlaQAMtkKUa9?si=m6YJWTwZQwS8TrFBdZ6pKA&pi=vjCw-aWNRQ6Ff
Me > https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/808673960847982592/the-shadow-chapter-1-peacockgalaxy-hetalia?source=share

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

My laptop is like 8 years old and making weird sounds while I type, I'm scared.

I really feel like I've butchered Antonio's character, my bad. Let's just say the stress got to him and he's still trying to force himself to be optimistic.

Also this chapter was originally going to be two but I thought you can all eat well and have it in one big go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The alley didn't block much noise, but he found it easy enough to focus. He blinked as he tipped the eye drops in, one at a time, but his vision didn't clear when in his mind's eye all he could see was death.

Alaric pushed all frustrations from his mind, rolling his shoulders and setting his jaw as he mentally combed through recent information. He knew for a fact the Copycat was experimenting. That was the only explanation for not chopping off that officer's head. At first, it may look like a devolution, considering the kill before Roderich was only caused by a strike to the back between the shoulder blades. But by not removing the head, it can only be considered a cruel escalation. A deviation that surely won't be the last.

Alaric tucked the eye drops away, blinking quickly and barely letting them settle before he pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. It was a photocopy of something he had gone over at least one hundred times. Yet, he kept going over it, over and over again, in the hopes that something new would stick out.

It was a rambling note the Copycat had sent to the media, hoping they would broadcast it. It certainly was no surprise - the predicted attention-seeking behaviour. Alaric hoped it came as no surprise to the Copycat that it never got published and instead was immediately placed in police hands. Alaric was most thankful that he had control over the media because otherwise... he didn't want to imagine what would happen if they had given in to a terrorist's demands.

I'm going to give you some exclusive informations, to put on the tv and everyone in the city will know who I am. I'm the Battle axe butcher and I killed Roderick! NOT the Trail Killer! Im not something you can kick to the corner!

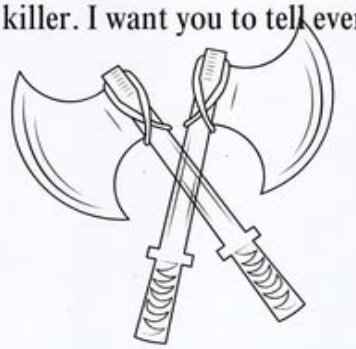
I know youll show the Police this note and Im counting on it. You can try and catch me Chief bileschmidt but it wont end well. I dont know why you lied to everyone and said it wasn't me because I left you a note but I guess you just didn't believe me. Or you didn't want to.

I bet you want to know who I am I won't tell you that but I will tel you I was inspired by the Trail killer and I always wondered what it was like to kill someone and thanks to him I now know and its awesome. Who knew I would be interested for making a name this way. Of course Id love to see who he is but I dont want him to get caught because wheres the fun in that? I would love to team up with him and then we can really have a fun time but since that wont happen I'll just be the scariest serial killer in the city. If I give him some competition everyone will see what I do. Im going to keep doing this until Im famous. Call me the king cus im gonna rule this city and over take the trail killer

Theres no hide what im capable of this is so much fun I wont stop anytime soon and its so easy too. I can't believe the police actually think they can do anything about us! There's no way theyre catching the trail killer and theres no way theyre catching me. Im smart and i know what im doing

I had fun killing Roderick and he was such pussy I found it hard to believe he was related to you and Ludwig. I beat him up and he deserved it and he cried when I cut his fingers off I really should've recorded it it was so funny. I know its sick and it was gross but its so much fun. I cut them off one by one and I really enjoyed it I just wish I made him eat them while he was still alive because that would'vebeen really fun. I just want to know if he would've done it. I think he wouldve because once he stoped being annoying and telling me to stop he started crying and begging so he probably wouldve if I ordered him to. I know the Chief is gonna be pissed but come on everyone knows that Roderick deserved it.

Anyway Ill be turning up the heat until you see me as the threat I really am and see that im definately not the trail killer. I want you to tell everyone that im out there and maybe ill stop killing your guys off.



Alaric was frustrated and angry, almost as much at himself as the Copycat because this was what finally made him fold. While he was here, overseeing, the newest member of the investigative team was picking up a very important parcel from the precinct.

It left him bitter to do it at all, but of course, it had to come mere moments before the memorial. The feeling of being stretched and torn never left him and he was complicit. The moment that parcel was in his hand, he would consume it because it was inconceivable to wait. If it offered *any* clarifying or additional insight, then he had to have it immediately.

Alaric had already deduced that the Copycat was suffering from sleep deprivation, or it was at least written impulsively late at night or early in the morning. Liquor may have been involved, as there was a faint odour, and it's possible that English isn't his only language. This whole letter was clearly in response to the Trail Killer being credited for Roderich's murder. Clearly, autocorrect didn't work, but why the misspelling of Roderich? That was just immature... the Copycat certainly knew him personally and wanted to vex his memory. Was the misspelling of 'Chief bileschmidt' intentional or simply phonetic? It seemed to be just incidental, as clearly from his prose, the Copycat harboured some respect for him and Ludwig, and likely the whole police profession.

He knew that the Copycat had personal ties to either Roderich or Gilbert, potentially both. The severity of those ties was subjective to the killer... Alaric was leaning towards Roderich being the first choice. The letter to Gilbert could've just been mocking, especially when this new note directly addressed the Chief of Police in its contents. But Roderich? What was done to him couldn't be ignored. Alaric had to consider the possibility that Roderich made the Copycat feel slighted. One that could be equally real or perceived... while he saw all the best traits in his grandson, it was possible someone only saw the worst. Alaric needed more information and it was only a matter of time before he'd have more to chew on-

"Sorry," came a weak chuckle from behind him, and Alaric tilted his head to see Antonio. "Can I just talk to you for a moment?"

"You may," Alaric pressed his lips thinly together as he pocketed the note. "Make it brief."

"Right, so uh, first of all, I am so so sorry for your loss," Antonio rubbed his hands together. "I'm really sorry that you had to go through that... you and Gilbert."

"What do you really want to tell me?" Alaric knew body language and knew Antonio wanted to address something. The sooner that was done, the sooner Alaric could resume mulling over the case.

"Um, actually I wanted to ask you something first," Antonio pulled his script from his pocket. "Just to get it out of the way, at least-"

"Yours was just a suggestion; you can adapt it however you like but all I require is that it follows the template." Alaric held up a hand, communicating that he didn't want to see it or need to. He knew Antonio could follow instructions.

"Are you sure you don't want to look over it?" The paper flopped as it gave into gravity, yet Antonio kept his hand out. Alaric took the sheet from his hand and skimmed over it.

"It's acceptable, you have nothing to worry about."

"Just acceptable? Do you want me to make it better? I can think of some stronger words if you want me to make people emotional... " Antonio continued rambling as he held the paper with shaky hands. "I know you must've thought I was the better option if you asked me over his sister, but-"

"The next of kin forfeited the opportunity," Alaric corrected, putting a hand on his shoulder. "She didn't want to endure the pressure of public speaking so you were considered instead. I know you can do this."

He meant that reassuringly, but it was hard to know if Antonio was just nodding for the sake of bringing his complaints to an end. Alaric could tell there was more he wanted to say, but the idea of forcing it out made him nervous, which was a characteristic he had never seen in the boy until recent times.

It seemed that today was bringing out the worst in everyone.

"What else do you have to tell me?" Alaric hoped that by not phrasing it as an option of 'do you?' then it might smooth over the process.

"Right, uh, I just don't want you to worry about Gilbert, okay? He's just really upset and whenever Ludwig comes up-" Antonio chuckled sheepishly, his hands kept nervously fluttering to his face. His entire demeanour wasn't just nerves, it was *distraught*. If Alaric was keeping score properly, he knew that Antonio had lost Francis and Lovino in quick succession. In his interview about the night of Lovino's death, Antonio was quick to admit that he was the one to drag the Italian to a bar... then leave him there.

And now he was impacted by Roderich's death. Alaric had never paid much attention to Antonio before, but he distinctly remembered the Spaniard being nothing like the pale imitation in front of him.

"I promise I'll help him today and make sure he doesn't ruin this. I really want to make sure the Trial Killer gets caught and- oh, I know you don't like calling him that, I'm sorry-"

"It doesn't matter. The name is part of the cultural zeitgeist now. There's nothing that can be done," Alaric stated. At least it had the unintended benefit of making the Copyc feel like he could never measure up to the Trail Killer, potentially assisting the police efforts in their current strategy. "Continue."

"Right, um, I'll keep him focused. Please just go easy on him because, well, it means that he can focus. I'll make sure he doesn't ah, ruin the memorial... or punch anyone..." Antonio trailed off, his toothy grin looking more like a grimace as he rambled. "He was just saying that because he's angry but he's mostly angry..." Antonio sighed, as if he didn't want to say this as it felt like a betrayal. "... at himself."

"I understand," Alaric said. He didn't see the point in insisting he had been going easy on Gilbert, not when that would just conflict with Antonio's stance. Though he had to hand it to the boy for stepping up and trying to help manage the situation while *trying* to keep himself together. "He hadn't processed his grief and is lashing out. I've seen it before."

"Um," Antonio chuckled and looked down. Alaric instantly knew there was something he wanted to tell him, but was weighing it up carefully first...

"If it pertains to Gilbert, I need to know."

"Have you got around to planning a funeral for Roderich yet?" Antonio said with a wince, but it seemed to be leading to his true confession.

"I haven't. Why do you ask?"

"Ah, well, he hasn't heard anything so he was just wondering..." Antonio strung his fingers together. Really, did Gilbert send his friend to ask?

In his peripheral vision, Alaric saw a man approaching and he instinctively assumed it was Augustus coming to give his two cents. Until he saw the height and blonde hair...

Oxenstierna regarded Antonio with his usual unanimated expression, and whatever the boy was going to say died on his tongue.

"Right right I know you're very busy! I'll go and uh, don't worry, okay?"

Antonio couldn't get out there fast enough and Alaric sighed, rubbing a hand across his face and lingering on the eyes again. His vision just wouldn't clear up and he knew it had nothing to do with the poor lighting in the alley.

"It was bad?" Oxenstierna stated, his tone lacking emotion and leaving everyone to take his words at face value. Something that Alaric really appreciated.

"It was, but it'll be under control soon enough," Alaric's eyes fell on the package. "Did you have trouble at the station?"

In other words, why had he taken so long?

"Traffic was bad," Oxenstierna held out the package, a yellow postal envelope labelled priority, but Alaric shook his head.

Honestly, he should've expected the delay and factored in traffic because he knew just how big this highly anticipated event really was.

In that package was something that proved he was at his wits' end and was crossing lines he had been determined not to cross. But desperate times, desperate measures... didn't bring him any comfort.

Hopefully, new material would. The best way to win is to be prepared and informed. Hopefully, consulting the FBI was worth it.

"Open it," he requested as he pried his eyes open and began using the eyedrops liberally. "I'll need you to read the contents..."

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> A timeless saying in our line of work is; if you want to know the artist, study his art. We understand that as a former agent yourself, you are uniquely qualified to make assessments you see fit and we hope our input helps further the investigation. Should you require our assistance again, please do not hesitate to reach out as we understand that this case is of the top priority.

It is evident that you are searching for two offenders and we agree that your current deductions of both serial offenders are sound. Our team has revised the resources you've sent us and have the following insight to offer.

While the Trail Killer appears to be inactive, it begs the question of why. Either something coincidental has occurred (hospitalisation, arrest), though it is very unlikely considering his demure nature, which would prevent unreasonable risk taking. He is either only inactive to enjoy a hiatus, or through some form of obligation. There is a reason he has not decided to strike again. This reason could be real or perceived; if it is perceived, it is likely he is holding out for a future event in his life and is unwilling to commit until this event has come to pass.

As you know, the murders immediately prior to Ludwig Beilschmidt's death were all attention-driven, becoming more and more intensely so as the Trail Killer's objectives refined themselves. His demeanour would've been uncharacteristically calm, a sign that his inner struggle had found a resolution and meaning. In the moments of murder, it is likely he operated professionally, only able to think of efficiency in his method. While he had begun killing as a form of expression, it soon became a mission.

However, before his desire for attention consumed him, it is apparent that he was acting out of a suffocated rage that had nowhere else to go but inward. It was only after reaching a threshold that he was no longer able to contain it. The individuals he chose to eliminate were selected for a reason, likely matching personality archetypes that he may have felt dominated by. He would've observed them until he decided they suited his purposes. He interacted with those victims, the ones without the signature on their foreheads, personally. There was more caution in those murders, sans Arthur Kirkland, as he deployed strategies to lure and to play out a fantasy of tricking and overcoming his oppression.

It is possible the Trail Killer wasn't just punishing those he killed. In particular, we would like to draw your attention towards Alfred Jones, who was documented to be on the scene of two of the early murders and should be questioned. We must rule out the possibility that he was coincidentally on the scene of both murders, otherwise we are presented with two possibilities. Either he is worth considering as a suspect due to being a first responder. Or, there is a possibility that he had become the focal point of the offender's rage and was punishing him. Consider re-interviewing him about anyone who may have had a grievance against him at that time, real or imagined. If he can name individuals, consider their relationship to Kirkland, Jones' cousin, who bore the brunt of an intense suppressed rage.

Regardless, the Trail Killer has shown adaptive behaviour that we know is exclusive to organised offenders. Your offender is certainly single, as he has no way of feeling known by another human being and cannot connect on such a level. With humanity never being reflected to him, he has lost touch with his own sense of feeling and self. While impaired, it is still there, only deeply wounded and mutilated. Hopefully, this is possible to exploit before and during his apprehension.

Though this offender harbours no guilt or remorse for any crimes committed, his only concern is being identified and apprehended. He'll be following the investigation but due to the ingrained belief of being inferior, he won't feel capable in interfering. Unable to imagine the outcome, doesn't feel confident and feels suffocated by authority, and his resentment may not be apparent. With his need for bloodshed came a need for control, a thirst to make up for what he had been robbed of since likely early childhood. When that sense of control seems to slip, so does he as he can't conceive it being anything other than a threat.

Many child psychologists have said that people either internalise or externalise their pain. Those who internalise it are more likely to commit murder, because they will have suppressed their rage for longer and be less likely to control themselves when frustration finally wins. Some who have suffered deprivation or abuse are more able to assimilate the experience than others.

Given that you theorise he may have a sibling, we find it appropriate to mention that there's a theory known as 'multiple gates', which we will insert an extract about now. *[The theory] recognises that positive and protective factors may come along in time to influence one sibling, but be too late for another. Or one child may be receptive to intervention and another may not.* This likely is what happened to your offender, and the sibling they likely live with is functional and another source of resentment.

Of course, every child fantasises about avenging themselves on those they think of as having humiliated or hurt them, but in a normal child their conscience or parental influence will remind them of the need for restraint. Children from secure loving environments know that bad things are ultimately, if not immediately, punished and good deeds will be rewarded, and so will learn to trust that grievances will be addressed by those in authority, whereas a child starved of affection and attention and conditioned to expect inconsistent responses will have no expectation of their injuries being considered seriously. Their sense of proportion and their perspective are distorted, meaning that they will overreact to the slightest provocation, striking out impulsively, taking the law into their own hands as they have no expectation of impartial justice.

Clearly, the Trail Killer had adapted his own form of 'justice' when the first stressor occurred and he killed Kirkland. He punished an individual and it soon developed into an obsession with punishing society at large. The media attention became the validation he never received.

We would also advise looking into Kirkland's personal life as it is increasingly more likely he was at least acquainted with his killer, though the extent of that acquaintence could be entirely one-sided from the killer's perspective.

The self-proclaimed 'Battle Axe Butcher', or 'Copycat' - a misleading name in the sense that he is not a complete imitator of the Trail Killer. The inspiration is undeniable and the admiration is obvious, if not outright, but he needs to be considered in a vacuum to understand his unique psychology. His MO is not comparable to your first offender and you must distinguish between them.

However, if we were to entertain the profiling for a complete copycat, we know they are vulnerable and have narcissistic qualities. Copying crimes makes them feel powerful and they never stop after one victim. These individuals thrive on media attention, which can be exploited for their downfall.

However, the Battle Axe Butcher reads as a classic strategic organised offender, for whom murder is their work. These types of offenders are the ones who create their own crime kits, including weapons, ligatures, rope, masking tape, binoculars, gloves, and even a change of clothes. They tend to be forensically aware and will take extra measures to evade capture and being linked to the crime. Some become sloppy as they devolve into disorganised offenders, which ends their criminal careers. The organised offender enjoys the predatory aspect of killing - the hunting, manipulating and gaining control. This is extremely evident in the

evidence and aftermath in Roderich Edelstein's file. He revelled in the execution just as much as every moment leading up to it.

A strategic organised offender and in this case, the Battle Axe Butcher, may select a certain kind of weapon and learn from experience. Because he is so skilled it is difficult to catch him. And when he is caught, everyone will say, “I can’t believe he did it.”

A lack of adaptability does not come from a lack of intelligence, but rather from being headstrong in personality. Your offender is bright, but an underachiever in a formal academic setting. He certainly has sadistic tendencies, as seen in the prolonged encounter with Edelstein, which exhibited both examples of physical and psychological torture. Had he been solely mission-oriented, he wouldn't have drawn out dismembering Edelstein for his statement piece.

The victims' personal property was taken and is being kept by your offender. These are viewed as trophies by the offender and allow him to relive the encounters. These will be kept in an area that is under his personal control, which he feels is secure but allows for ready access. Alternatively, if any of the items seem unassuming enough, it is likely he is displaying them as he has a bold personality and the charisma to make anyone believe anything he desires. He will get a thrill out of others seeing these items but not understanding their significance.

The Battle Axe Butcher's attacks are not motivated by a stresser now and were not inspired by an initial one, rather he is finally acting on a morbidly curious urge he's had and after seeing the supposed fanfare and fame for the Trail Killer and yearning for that glory, fully realised. We highly suspect he is familiar with the initial assault sites of the Trail Killer, and will revisit his crime scenes along with the scenes of the Trail Killer.

He will only escalate. After his first two civilian kills, he became emboldened enough to challenge law enforcement. 'All bets are off once a cop is killed.' The Battle Axe Butcher has no scientific, technical or anatomical knowledge beyond basic theory, and no working experience such as butchery. His efforts are entirely to realise a fantasy that grows bigger with each successful slaughter and sets his eyes on new heights. He will stop at nothing to burn as brightly as he can for as long as he can. He wants to validate his superiority and he'll do it through fear, as he sees it as finally making a name for himself.

There is only one hard fact that can be singled out from the mythology of true crime, that is almost all serial killers come from dysfunctional backgrounds and the vast majority are men. Almost all of these men will have suffered abuse of one kind or another in their formative years. A deprived childhood and physical abuse are not, of course, the only contributing factors in many cases of psychotic or aberrant behaviour. In modern society, the pressure to succeed can put even the most well-adjusted adult under enormous stress. But if an individual has psychological or emotional problems, the pressure to be somebody or nobody can have a detrimental effect on their mental state.

Another consideration is the psychology of how the offender deals with the body. If the body has been dumped in the open with no attempt to conceal it, the killer is showing contempt for the victim. A body that has been dragged and dumped tells investigators that the perpetrator wanted to delay the discovery until he could be clear of an area and that he felt he had no time to cover his tracks. A first-time killer wouldn’t be so deliberate. If there were no tracks or prints other than the killer’s, it would be safe to assume that the body had been carried and

placed there. If the corpse was dressed and made presentable with an attempt to restore dignity in death, it could suggest psychic erasure or restitution. This remorse of a belated attempt to make good would not be evident in psychotics or sociopaths, but in obsessive compulsive personalities and could betray the fact that the killer knew the victim personally. The same is true if there is evidence of repeated blows or stab wounds to the face which can betray an attempt to obliterate the victim. From this, we would assume the Battle Axe Butcher knew Roderich personally, as his first murder was a test run and every one since had been nothing more than a means to an end and small changes in experimentation.

You also need to understand that the act of murder is exhausting and disposing of the body can leave the perpetrator physically and emotionally drained for days. Even without either killer taking much effort with their disposals, it would still be considered a tiring act. Someone in their lives would notice, even if they don't understand the significance of what they've seen. Once the offender is caught, this will be apparent with hindsight.

Neither offender profiles as suicidal, even when caught. If caught, the Trail Killer wouldn't want to take responsibility and try to proclaim innocence. This is a strategy that may have worked in the past due to being assumed either as personally incapable, or simply overlooked. Should the Battle Axe Butcher be caught, it depends on variables yet to be determined. He may allow himself to be caught, 'turning himself in' to gloat and enjoy the glory should it line up with his fantasy. However his fantasy is entirely subjective and only known to him, however it is equally likely that he has another end goal in mind just like it is that he doesn't.

There are many strategies you could employ that are up to your discretion. For example, local law enforcement agencies could organise a series of public meetings to evaluate the danger to public safety and publicise what they know about the offender in the belief that he will attend, being unable to resist the temptation to assess the level of threat he has created. Detectives would then have a chance to interview any individuals who matched the age and physical characteristics of the profile and take names and addresses for further investigation.

Another productive strategy might be to announce that a witness has come forward, which could flush out your offender. Though this is potentially more for the Battle Axe Butcher, who has been following along with the investigation and may just preemptively turn up at the police station to explain himself.

Of course, all strategies are yours to devise and should be thought of your own initiative, creating strategies based on your personal assessment of the situation. For example, if you suspect an offender frequents a specific location, consider raffling a TV set and collecting names and addresses. You could also organise a fundraising event for the victims and advertise for volunteer security, an efficient strategy for the strategically organised offender. Alternatively, you could form a search party for a 'missing and potential victim'. Of course you'd attribute it to the Trail Killer, but each offender would assume it was the other's victim. The Battle Axe Butcher will believe the Trail Killer is active again and personally volunteer for the search, if only for the thrill of involvement.

The best method of learning about the killer's mind is to talk to them, face to face. Of course, this can only be done after arrest and preferably executed in prison after the offender's appeal has been turned down so they will have less reason to withhold information or lie. As Agent Douglas has said before, *"the majority of criminals like nothing better than talking about themselves and basking in the recognition they imagine their crimes have earned them. From*

dawn to dusk each and every day of their sentence, these men have nothing better to do than think about themselves, to crow about how they had outwitted the authorities and brood on the mistakes they had made that eventually led to their capture. Some genuinely remorseful individuals might welcome the opportunity to unburden themselves, but the majority would likely only cooperate because they would relish the chance to share their fantasies with those they imagined would appreciate their art."

It would not be preemptive to consider interrogation strategies. For the Trail Killer, make him feel in control and like he's on an equal playing field personally. Even go as far as to imply he was hard to catch and if it weren't for 'the circumstances', you don't know if this was even possible.

For the Battle Axe Butcher, make him feel like you're enthralled with his exploits and let him run his mouth. Explain how you had been hoping to catch him and looking forward to meeting him. Minimise his public erasure by spinning it as if he forced your hand and you had no choice but to hide his existence from the public because otherwise, his fame would reach unfathomable levels.

We see this case as a matter of utmost importance and if you'll allow us to assist, we are more than happy to cooperate on the investigation and lend you our power, authority, and resources. Any further questions regarding this analysis or discussion regarding investigative strategy and interview techniques should be directed to the F.B.I Academy, Behavioural Science Unit.

Chapter End Notes

Let me be upfront, the part about child psychology I outright plagiarised out of a book about FBI profiling. Lots of key points came from that book but I adapted them to fit the context but the child psychology part was just too on point and isn't it more authentic if it comes from an actual FBI book? Lots of the strategy section was yoinked from there too. I tried to make it look referenced ahaha (The book is: In the minds of murderers the inside story of criminal profiling by Paul Roland)

Here's some fanart I made! https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/809880141068173312/another-poster-i-made-based-off-of-my-fic-the?source=share

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alaric sighed, the wall behind him digging into his thin dress shirt as he continued to rub his eyes and willed his vision to sharpen.

He had finally reached a breaking point, as evidenced by his eventual relenting in allowing the FBI to review the cases. A difficult decision considering his lack of faith in the federal bureau from his time there, but he had to do *something*, otherwise he'd be stumped and worse, under fire. Uneducated people with loud opinions would start talking, completely oblivious to how TV glamorises real-life profiling by wrapping it neatly up in a single episode. In reality, profiling can take weeks, months, or even years...

Alaric would *not* wait that long. Even if it meant doing something he said he wouldn't.

He didn't miss his time at the bureau; he didn't miss the stress or the politics or the suffocating bureaucracy, all of which left him jaded because justice was often the last thing on people's minds even if it was the first thing on their tongues. The FBI's offer for more resources was redundant and not one the Chief would be taking them up on. He only wanted their opinion, not their meddling. He knew he was fully capable of bringing this to a close himself.

Still, he had a feeling something was missing with this investigation and from what the bureau had to say, they couldn't fill the gaps. But regardless, his brain was a machine and the worn cogs were ever churning. He still had cards to play.

Oxenstierna didn't say anything after reading it aloud, not beyond a thoughtful grunt. As his eyes skimmed the paper a few more times, the Chief glanced down the alleyway to see the growing crowd outside the roped-off parking lot.

"What's the time?"

"We have fifteen minutes."

The crowd was loud, but nothing Alaric couldn't drown out. He knew the cameras were already rolling and recording, so even without someone stationed on them live, it would catch if the Copycat stood out. Whether that was trying to climb the boundary or by trying to strike up a conversation with the police, he would know. It would only take a week to finalise a list of suspects...

"We'll return to this later. It seems we may have something to consider after all..." Alaric sighed. Oxenstierna only grunted in acknowledgement, sliding the package under his arm.

"It's time to debrief," Alaric announced as he exited the alleyway. Immediately, he could feel all eyes on him and that comforting feeling of being an imposing figure returned. With just one movement from his hand, he communicated to all the nearby officers *it was time* and he entered the bus.

The volunteer speakers were inside and Alaric searched for his grandson. Feliciano, his grandfather, and Antonio were on one side, muttering quietly with the sheets Alaric gave between them. But when he entered, they fell silent. The Chief caught them glancing at Gilbert, who was sitting in the corner with one hand supporting his head as his clouded-over eyes stared blankly into the wall. He didn't react at all when his grandfather entered, frustrating him to no end. Alaric always hated being ignored, so naturally, his grandson had the worst case of selective hearing he'd ever seen.

And naturally... Gilbert was the only grandson he had left.

"I hope you had sufficient time to prepare yourselves," Alaric said, addressing the crowd in the bus. "I need to debrief my officers with confidential information-" *regarding the investigation*, is what he'd like to say. Though better not when his grandson was too temperamental to predict. "If you go down the alley, you'll see a door to the supermarket's storeroom. You can compose yourselves in there until your friends and families arrive."

Gilbert didn't move when the others did. In fact, it seemed that he hadn't even heard until Feliciano was grabbing his hand and Antonio was whispering in his ear. Then they all left without a word and the only acknowledgement that Alaric was there at all came from Augustus when he put a firm hand down on his shoulder.

Alaric sighed in the brief moment of silence and suppressed the urge to reach for the eye drops again. When the investigative team came in, he wasn't going to waste any time.

"Now, we won't be starting exactly when we scheduled because hopefully, waiting makes our killers nervous," Alaric glanced at his watch and if he strained, he could make out the time. Ten minutes... and considering their turnout estimates, it would take quite the effort to let everyone in and get their names. But Alaric valued efficiency and knew his team could do it.

"I know you are familiar with our profiles and know where the margin for error is. I would rather we take the safe route at the cost of more work later than overlook a potential suspect. We cannot afford to let an opportunity like this go to waste and we will get something from this ordeal."

There were more papers in his pocket, pages about their killers, strategies to implement, key things to look for. But they stayed in his pocket because even if his eyes were a little foggy, he knew exactly needed to be said.

"It is extremely likely that both the Trail Killer and the self-proclaimed 'Battle Axe Butcher' will be present, and you will have to keep a few things in mind to pick them out of the crowd." Alaric detested the notion that he acknowledged the Copycat as anything other than what he was, but the FBI file did make a good point. Given his experience, he knew better than anyone that language does shape perception.

"The Trail Killer is a withdrawn individual who cannot communicate properly and won't be holding much conversation. He'll be here with someone else who appears to be more invested in the proceedings, and this person is likely whoever he lives with."

"The Battle Axe Butcher," Alaric withheld a sigh, "will appear subdued because he is capable of a degree of camouflage, but he will be intrigued and thrilled. He will be leading all the conversations that he engages in indiscriminately, with both any company he brings or receptive strangers."

Alaric wrapped up by mentioning that they would be combing through the footage for weeks to refine what jumped out while watching it live. They needed to prepare for the fact that they were going to end up with a lot of potential suspects.

But from there it was just a process of elimination and an inevitability...

Alaric glanced out of the armoured window to see that the crowd outside was growing by the minute, making a football stadium look like a quaint gathering. He'd still send the footage to other police precincts across the country to make their own lists too, because he knew his people weren't equipped enough and not immune to exhaustion. Cross-examination would only strengthen suspects and shorten lists after all.

Even if the list was a thousand people, that was still a start. All he had to do was compare with Ludwig's funeral and then use the process of elimination to narrow his focus...

Alaric then began assigning the team tasks from taking names to marshalling the street. It felt more like putting together a production than anything else, and the Chief sighed as he rubbed his eyes again.

Oxenstierna looked at him expectantly, being the only one left in the vehicle.

"Drive this bus around the block to the pre-approved parking space. If anyone stops you, indulge them. Return whenever you can and just flank the podium. Keep an eye on the crowd." With that, Alaric stepped out into the fresh air. It had been nearly freezing when he arrived that morning, but now as anticipation lingered and thousands of bodies converged in, the air was hot and suffocating.

As the bus departed and was swallowed by the crowd, he could see just how many had turned out here today. It was quite the sentiment and the pressure, as Alaric could actually see how many people were depending on him.

The military was in place, having been briefed beforehand for their limited role. Alaric had weighed it up over a couple of sleepless nights but ultimately chose them over baiting the Battle Axe Butcher into signing up for 'voluntary security'. In the end, he conceded that it would only exhaust him and his officers to bring in so many civilians in the mix and given what had been happening at night... they needed rest. With 95% of the force working nights, that was the same reason why he didn't have any plainclothes officers in the crowd. All available officers had been roaming the streets during curfew hours and stretched thin enough...

So he settled for having the military, because that was one of the last ways he could escalate, and their presence was an unspoken threat of that. At least the Chief didn't need to give them any special instructions beyond simply standing there for the sake of appearances, emphasising just how serious this was. The Trail Killer was known globally and Alaric only had himself to blame for not getting it under control to begin with. He should've got the media in a chokehold before rumours of a serial killer were ever officially confirmed.

After tearing his gaze away from the crowd, he noticed some of the speakers lingering in the alleyway. Augustus was trying to tug them along but Feliciano and Antonio were frozen under the weight of so many people's eyes. Gilbert was absent and Alaric sighed before approaching.

"I understand it's intimidating, but it won't be unlike the funeral. Even if you're nervous, use it to your advantage. You don't even need to do it well; you just need to make an appearance. People will sympathise."

Alaric just hoped that when it came to Roderich's funeral, he could think of a different strategy ...should he have to. Some part of him didn't want to hold Roderich's funeral until he saw Ludwig's memorial successful... because he didn't want to turn another funeral into something bigger than the intimate moment that belonged to a grieving family. But if it came down to it, he wouldn't put it off. He'd just have to find the right angle, adjust from his losses and make *something*, ***anything*** work.

Feliciano just nodded while his grandfather kept a taunt arm around his shoulders. Alaric knew the man coddled him too much, but it was something he wouldn't comment on now, not when the boy's emotions would be so vital for today.

"You know, you used to always be so calm and collected," Augustus murmured, his hand rhythmically rubbing Feliciano while he addressed the Chief.

"Are you implying something's changed?" Alaric couldn't see why Augustus was reminiscing now. Especially when he was still calm and collected. He was as level-headed as he's ever been and even in hard times, he won't allow himself to lose momentum.

"No, well," Augustus chuckled. "You are, but I think it's getting to you."

Alaric just gave him a flat look. He didn't need to entertain this.

"Even now we're still friends, no matter what happened in the past. I know you're a good man and a good friend. You care about people!" Augustus began monologuing as his volume rose. "And remember when... when Lovi died, you called me to inform me personally? And when I had to quit being on TV because I just couldn't-?" Augustus squeezed his eyes as he continued on. "You reminded me of my legacy and told me it wouldn't go away overnight just because I was facing hard times. Then gave me a chance to get involved so I could help do justice-"

"That was a strategic move, and I haven't been happy about your involvement since because lingering around the station isn't as helpful as you think." Alaric stated, casting a glance over his shoulder to keep tabs on the incoming crowd. Not that an ETA was necessary, the event started when he decided.

Augustus sighed before guiding Feliciano to Antonio and pointing for them to leave. Alaric kept his arms crossed, knowing that as the youths left, he was about to hear something annoyingly irrelevant. He didn't have time for this. Alaric wondered if this was going to be yet another insistent plea from Augustus that he needed help and had to accept it, as if the Chief was failing to be strong and about to collapse.

"I'll just say what I'm thinking even if it makes me sound like an asshole," Augustus opened strongly, half sighing. "I really want to think the best of you and I know that you love your family. You'd sell your soul for them! But at least by spending so much time with you and seeing what you've become- or maybe what you've always been..." Augustus sighed, only briefly hesitating. "I can see why Gilbert is the way that he is."

Alaric bristled and narrowed his eyes. Was he serious? *How **Gilbert** turned out?!* That was just as rich as it was unexpected.

"What do you mean by that?" The question was loaded because the only way Augustus could answer was insultingly. If the man were to back down now, he'd be a coward and he wasn't going to be that.

"I think you know..."

"I am not responsible for how Gilbert turned out. I did my best with him." Alaric dictated. Gilbert may not have been the easiest child, but Alaric gave him every opportunity possible and didn't let coddling obstruct him from success. "Why preface that I'm a good person if you've decided I'm not."

Gilbert was already causing enough tension as it was and now Augustus was overstepping, *again*.

"I'm not saying you're not, but why can't you see what's going on with him?"

"I'm not blind to the fact that he's grieving."

"But you don't *know about it*! When have you last talked to him? He doesn't even want to live there anymore because his brother's not there but he can't move out because he wants to leave Ludwig's room untouched!"

"He doesn't have the means to move anywhere else regardless," Alaric sighed. "I had him assessed when he was observed after Roderich's death. He wasn't at risk for self-harm or suicidal. Clearly he just needs space, and his friends are a sufficient support network to negate any threat he poses to himself."

"You can't just treat him like he's just something to examine." Augustus stepped closer, putting both hands on Alaric's shoulders as a desperate look gleaned in his eyes. "Come on, there's more going on with him. He needs help!"

"Don't be absurd, of course he can't be reduced to a set of considerations," Alaric grunted and pushed the other's hands off him. "You only search so hard for signs that people need help because you want to feel needed. I see what you're doing here and I won't rise to it. You realised you couldn't get your foot in the door with me so now you find a conspiracy in my grandson."

"Don't profile me," Augustus just huffed in bitter amusement and grief as he stepped back, casting a long look behind him. "I promised I wouldn't say anything but you need to know how much he cares about what you think."

"He shouldn't," Alaric folded his arms again. "He never has-"

"But he does!" Augustus looked split as he glanced behind him before blurting; "He's worried you think he's happy his cousin is dead!"

"What?" Alaric's eyebrows furrowed. "That's ludicrous, I'd never assume he'd think such a thing. Especially when it's evident he is *not* happy. Are you really suggesting I treat him like a suspect? For being as dramatic as he's always been? I understand they're all grieving and want someone to blame and they have that killer to blame. Not *me*."

Augustus sighed and gave Alaric a long and unsettling look.

"Not knowing what you're thinking is a part of your charm... you used to have so much charisma, even if you couldn't smile..." Augustus sighed. "I know we're not as close as we used to be, but not even I know what you're thinking. So how's Gilbert ever meant to?"

Just before Alaric could suggest his longtime acquaintance go join the others in the store room, he spoke after a long sigh,

"Gilbert's brain hasn't finished developing..." Augustus had a sombre look on his face. "What's your excuse?"

"I assure you, I give him as much grace as I can afford." Alaric tightened his arms against his chest as his jaw started to grind. "He doesn't need you to fight his battles for him. You can critique me all you like, but I don't owe you an apology for how I manage my grandson. If anything I take pride in the fact that he isn't helplessly dependent on me like yours is."

Augustus just looked at him with that same expression that came across his face every time he had poked and prodded at Alaric, asking him if he was alright. If his blood pressure wasn't high enough, it was certainly at a boiling point now.

But instead of the water bubbling over and rubbing down the sides of the pot... even though the air was putridly suffocating and Alaric realised he said more than he wanted, contributing to the heat...

The pot continued to froth up and churn... but nothing came of it.

"You should get back to doing the police stuff." Augustus eventually stated. "Clearly it's important... I'll look after the kids."

If it was a battle of wills, Alaric took it that he won. He watched the other walk away and didn't feel the need to say anything. So he bit his tongue and narrowed his eyes, because wasn't he already dealing with enough?

Alaric decided that he would not be using Augustus' position to assist the investigation in the future because clearly, he couldn't trust the man to take into consideration the circumstances. And now he was encouraging Gilbert's turbulence and hanging it over his head while doing so, as if he didn't have enough on his shoulders. Why couldn't they see that he wasn't the villian here and he never wanted to be?

Chapter End Notes

Here's some more cool stuff for everyone to check out!
Starphobiia (ao3) | Starphobiia (tiktok) > https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZThWSfGGa/
orphan_account > https://archiveofourown.org/works/65365918/chapters/168199048
H3110s (Ao3) | D34DBR4INS (tiktok) > https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8V8Qew6/
https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/811217560799412224/another-poster-i-made-based-on-the-shadow-this?source=share

Also:

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing Matthew noticed was that it was crowded. Which was to be expected, but he didn't realise it would be to this extent.

He and Alfred had come early at his brother's insistence and watched as the street around them began to fill with activity. The crowd spilled out into the road and surrounding blocks, all of which had to be blocked off so no traffic could pass through. The energy was buzzing all around them and was already overwhelmingly *more* than Roderich's memorial.

His brother had wanted to come even *earlier* to try to find Gilbert and Feliciano, but listened to reason when Matthew said the Chief clearly didn't want them there. Or Gilbert, since he hadn't replied to any of Alfred's texts and he let the whole world know about it by pelting a pillow across the living room.

"Dude, where are they?" Alfred muttered to himself as he strained to see, leaning over the rope partition. "I bet they're in that bus..."

Matthew just ignored him, his eyes glazing across the huddling crowd instead. He knew the Copycat would be here... he just hoped to spot him before the police did. Or before the police realised they did...

Alfred only grew more tense as the scheduled time crawled closer, but there was no change and nothing indicating that the event was starting. So when officers moved to *finally* usher them all in, Alfred sprinted ahead. Matthew gritted his teeth as his brother got lost in the crowd.

It was for the best. An eagerness would only look bad, which was why Matthew had brought sunglasses to hide his sweeping eyes. A smart move when he noticed just how many hidden cameras there were, recording every action...

Just like his presence here. An officer asked for his name and Matthew briefly considered lying before telling the truth. He wasn't documented at Ludwig's funeral and was certain he'd be overlooked because surely another reason to collect names was to compare any notable behaviour. All he would have to do was not stand out, which was something he was an unwitting expert at.

One thing that *did* stand out was the military personnel standing around and not interacting with the crowd at all. It made Matthew a little uneasy because he couldn't assume the Chief's motive. Did it have anything to do with the Copycat? Was it a means of crowd control? Another regular trick to get information? Or did he already know something and was planning on acting on it? If it was simply about intimidation, it was working.

It took him a couple of minutes to find Alfred again, who had made his way right to the front and had thrown his jacket over a few seats to claim them. Matthew quickly pressed up to his brother's side before they could get separated again, feeling him tense from the cold. Alfred didn't even acknowledge him, just staring at the stage and craning to see beyond it.

One thing Matthew was grateful for was the fact that Alfred didn't have his gun on him, *unlike* before. When they returned from Roderich's memorial, Alfred pulled it out with a groan and revealed he had it the entire time. How Alfred forgot about it, Matthew would never know, but it was so stupid that it made him want to facepalm. Hopefully showing up to Roderich's memorial with a *gun* wasn't visible on the cameras...

At least after sleeping, Alfred was more alert and almost *too* energetic.

"Al," Matthew got his attention by repeating his name without speaking too loudly.

"What?" Alfred sounded annoyed at being distracted from his pedantic attempt to spot his friends.

"Don't try to do anything distracting." Matthew appealed. He had to choose the right reason for Alfred to agree with. "Just watch because if you try to get involved, the Chief will just take it out on Gilbert."

Alfred cursed under his breath, leaning on the metal railing that kept the public away from the stage. Matthew let out a sigh. It would benefit everyone if Alfred just observed instead of trying to get personally involved, like always.

Then Alfred straightened suddenly and waved past him. Matthew turned to see that Basch was only a few yards away, leaning on the railing as he stared at the covered statue.

"He's not even looking," Alfred sighed as he slumped further on the railing. "I guess we should give him space but who isn't cheered up by their friends? A load shared is a load uh... lightened?" Alfred scratched his eyebrows. "Whatever the saying is..."

"I don't know if he considers you friends," Matthew replied. It was odd and unexpected seeing Basch here. Now that strange feeling from that morning was justified... He didn't know what to make of Basch examining Roderich's street memorial like he did, or the current distorted look on his face that he wasn't even trying to hide. Or the fact that he had a bag slung over his shoulder that he wasn't carrying this morning.

If Matthew were the Copycat... what would he do? What would he feel? Was 'inspired' the wrong word and it was actually something different all along? Was the Copycat *jealous* of the Trail Killer?

He knew it was pointless to try, but he wished he could get a distraction of 'The Trail Killer' from Alfred so he knew what he was looking for and not going in blind.

If only he didn't kill Ludwig... Ludwig would've made a profile on this other killer and it would've been passed through hands until Matthew saw it. But he did what he had to and at the very least, Ludwig never finalised his profile on the Trail Killer. Hopefully, that set the police back enough to be worth it.

Basch clenched his jaw, determined eyes glowering at the veiled statue. Matthew saw how Alfred and his friends felt while on their hunt and while losing people... Matthew didn't want to jump to conclusions but he really needed to keep a better eye on Basch. Because even if he wasn't the Copycat, he could just be another desperate person trying to catch the 'Trail Killer'.

Then there would be another variable on the streets at night...

"Of course we're friends, we know each other," Alfred muttered, tilting his head towards the front. "Isn't he related to them somehow...?"

"He's Ludwig and Gilbert's cousin." Matthew didn't know how Alfred didn't know this if he claimed Basch was a friend. "But he's not related to the Chief or Roderich."

If Basch was the Copycat... why would he ever want to be? Matthew knew that Basch, as a general statement, really didn't like other people... but was that enough to murder them? Basch usually just avoided people instead of actually going out of his way to do anything. And so far the Copycat had only been killing cops and Roderich, who had ties to the police. No one killed anyone unless they needed to, which obviously didn't apply here, or *wanted* to. So why would the Copycat want to only kill cops? If Basch was the Copycat, then what was he getting from it?

"Was he at Ludwig's funeral?" Alfred asked or mused aloud, who knew?

"I don't remember seeing him, but that doesn't mean he wasn't there," Matthew shrugged as he tried to remember. If Basch had been anywhere, he would've been lingering at the back... does that make it any more likely that Basch was up to something?

Now that he thought about it, when the Chief lowered Ludwig's coffin into the ground... had Basch been there? Did the Chief's insistence on family extend to him? Was that why Basch had left early? To meet them all there and say his final words in private?

"Actually, he was there... I just didn't see him afterwards and forgot..." Alfred's eyebrows furrowed. "Clearly, he didn't stick around... do you think he's doing okay?"

"He always acts like that, eh? It would be impossible to know," Matthew shrugged, more concerned with reading the crowd and if Alfred left to ask Basch, that wouldn't be Matthew's problem...

Before Alfred could reply, more voices joined the mix as Mathias, Lukas and Tino arrived, this time dressed appropriately for the occasion.

"Finally! Someone we know!" Mathias came to stand beside Alfred and leaned on the railing. "There's so many people here!"

"I know, can you believe this crowd? It's almost intimidating..." Tino chuckled wryly. "I'd hate to stand on that stage and have this pressure..."

Lukas made a noise of agreement, even if his expression didn't change much.

"I know dude, it's so big..." Alfred said. "Where's uh, Emil? Was going out this morning enough for him or something?"

"Something like that," Lukas stated.

"He's babysitting Peter," Tino sighed. "Peter really wanted to come today but... I don't know if it's a good idea."

"I think you're being overprotective," Mathias frowned. "How would it be inappropriate if he came?"

"Because the same killer that slaughtered his brother, killed Ludwig," Lukas said, giving a flat look. "Because this is a really big crowd and it wouldn't be good for him if he got overwhelmed."

When people spoke about the Trail Killer right in front of him, it was easy to forget they were talking about *him*. Of course, he knew it was him and the result of his efforts, but sometimes the way they just spoke made him feel like they were talking about a fictional character... someone so far removed from him.

They would never see him coming.

"Yeah but, I don't think he'd really think of it like that. He just doesn't want to miss out, and he really wanted me to convince you guys," Mathias countered. "Shouldn't we at least record it for him?"

"No, we don't need to. Berwald said someone would be recording it anyway, so I'm sure if he really wants to see it... " Tino sighed. "I just told him it was going to be boring until he agreed. Emil promised to distract him, so I'm sure he'll be fine."

Matthew couldn't understand the sentiment. You could argue it might help if Peter came, because he'd feel a sense of closure or community and not feel alone. He didn't need to be sheltered when the whole country, whole continent, and likely the whole world knew who the Trail Killer was.

Maybe Matthew was so annoyed by it because now that he thought about it, where had he heard this before? He saw this play out before when it was other people telling *him* how he should feel and making decisions for him...

"Yeah, I'm sure he will be," Alfred nodded. "He's a kid, just give him candy, right?"

Tino chuckled a little at that, implying Alfred wasn't that wrong.

"Plus... if this is anything like Lud's funeral, we don't know how it's going to turn out," Alfred glanced back, eyes scanning around him.

"Exactly, we can decide afterwards if it's something he should watch," Lukas added.

"Yeah, this could go south quickly," There was a conspirational tone in Alfred's voice, "We don't actually know who's here."

"Uh, I guess not," Tino smiled politely, not confused but... wary.

"Yeah that's right," Mathias jumped in, his voice slightly hushed as he turned to Alfred. "You said the Trail Killer would've been at Lud's funeral. Does that mean he's here?"

"Fuckin' probably," Alfred's dark eyes scoured the crowd and Matthew glanced too.

If Alfred saw the Copycat... would he react? If Alfred mentioned having a bad feeling about anyone, then Matthew would have to take it as a sign.

"I just hope the police know what they're looking for," Lukas mumbled. "If he was at Ludwig's funeral... clearly he can hide well."

"I think the police have this under control," Tino said optimistically.

"Does anyone know when this is going to start? We've been waiting for ages," Mathias sighed.

"I dunno, maybe something came up?" Alfred suggested, and a slight smile crawled across his face. "But they're failing to honour Lud's memory here cus he lived for being punctual."

"I'd say it was because the crowd was so big," Lukas considered much more seriously. "And the public didn't know there was going to be paid parking... I don't know why that wasn't included on the police website."

"I suppose whoever came up with that thought it would be a great fundraising idea," Tino laughed almost guiltily, sharing a look with Lukas. "Oh well, at least it's going to a good cause."

"It's a good thing I always lose shit in the car," Alfred scoffed. "I found enough loose change to make five bucks."

The conversation fizzed and reached an awkward pause, and Matthew could see his brother's brain lagging as he tried to think of something to say.

"I still can't believe this happened to Ludwig," Mathias spoke, looking at the sheet draped over the forboding statue. "Because Lud was so smart, he should've seen it coming."

"That's victim blaming," Lukas said deadpan.

"But I'm not! He was really smart!" Mathias huffed, indignant, before sighing and threading a hand through his hair. "I thought he was cool and I wish I was closer to him..."

"I know man, once people are gone..." Alfred muttered as his shoulders slumped, and Matthew just barely heard him.

Tino just pressed his lips together in sympathy as he patted Mathias' bicep.

"You can be if someone lends me a shovel," Lukas remarked.

"Aw, come on, you love me," Mathias pulled him into a firm hug, rocking from side to side. Lukas tolerated it for a moment before jabbing him in the ribs.

"Come on, guys, we're here to show support!" Tino shook his head, even if there was a slight smile present from their antics.

"At least like this, he'll be able to pick us out of the crowd," Lukas noted.

"Hah?" Mathias blinked at the same time Alfred said, "What?"

Matthew also thought it was strange but didn't bother, not when he was clearly out of the loop of their well-developed friend group. Mathias and Alfred not being clued in was likely just because they weren't so bright.

"Could you imagine being one of the people who work there?" Mathias leaned on the railing again and pointed at the store past the makeshift stage. "Imagine you clock in one morning just to discover someone died right outside?"

"I imagine it would be a headache," Lukas said. "Like the Danish."

"*You're* a headache," Mathias just gave him a pointed look as his lip twitched upward.

"What do you call a Dane with an IQ of five?" Lukas jabbed a finger into Mathias' eyebrow, right on top of a scabbing wound.

Matthew remembered all the times Alfred had suddenly jerked in his direction just to laugh when he flinched, calling him a baby while doing it over and over while telling him just not to flinch. He sighed at the memory and pushed it from his mind, unable to feel any grievances towards Alfred now.

"What?" Mathias slapped the other's hand away and put a hand on his hip as he tried to appear serious. Though he was failing due to the ghost of a smile that he was struggling to fight. "*Mathias*?"

"*Gifted*." Lukas seemed pleased with himself.

Tino tried to stifle his laughter, but his shoulders gave him away as they shook. As the others continued to talk, Alfred sighed and slumped on the railing as he rubbed at his face, pulling at the ever-present bags under his eyes.

"Dude, where do you think Toni and Kiku is? -Fuck, *are*?" Alfred grumbled, reaching for his phone.

Matthew's first suggestion would've been to text, but clearly he didn't need to say that as Alfred had thought of that anyway and was just being annoying by thinking out loud. Begging for attention without asking for it.

Alfred muttered his texts as he typed them and if Matthew strained, he could hear it over the rumbling of the crowd. He leaned in, cocking his head to catch every word when Alfred mumbled the replies to himself, his irritation motivating him to let his snark spill out.

"Okay, cool, so Toni and whoever the fuck Augustus is with Gil and Feli, gotcha. Why wouldn't you tell me sooner? how is gil ? "

A moment after waiting for a response, Alfred was ranting again.

"Uh, duh, of course I knew Augusus was Feli's gramps, I'm not a fucking idiot. Also of course Gil's doing bad, I'm not stupid!" Alfred jammed his fingers on his screen at record speed. "i want to know how he's bad..."

Matthew hardened his jaw and resisted rolling his eyes at Alfred's irritable behaviour.

"Yeah okay, that checks out, of course he only cares about stopping the killing. I could've guessed that cus it's not like he hasn't gone AWOL or anythin'-"

"*Oi,* Jonsie!"

"Man, are you fucking kidding me?" Alfred grunted before turning around with a grin. "Hey! What are you doing here!"

"Come to check out all the fun," Steve said as he slapped a hand over Alfred's shoulder. "Whatcha doin'?"

Matthew noticed the lack of Zach. Was it a case of just being lost in the crowd... or was he left at home? He turned around and leaned on the railing to look natural while he scanned through the flock of people.

"Uh, just texting Ivan and that..." Alfred held up his phone as he turned to use it again.

"Alright, alright, I'll wait." Steve put his hands up before striking up conversation with the others.

"You should ask him where Zach is," Matthew suggested.

"Yeah, later." Alfred bent his head forward while his fingers flew. Matthew glanced down and tried to make sense of what was being texted.

Ivan was here, but needed to find his older sister since they were apparently participating? Which bothered Alfred if the long paragraphs were anything to go by. Then Ivan just stopped responding and that irked Alfred more.

Matthew wondered what participating meant and let his eyes roam over the crowd to see if he could spot them. It was quite the outcome and it was almost impossible to think that it was all because of him, yet at the same time, it was bizarrely flattering. He saw a couple of his brother's acquaintances in the crowd, but as soon as his eyes glazed past them, he lost them and decided not to point them out.

Then he picked out a familiar brunette sitting by herself and realised Erzsébet was here. She hadn't spotted them and it was likely she wouldn't, not when tears were pouring down her face and she dabbled them with a soggy cloth. Her glossy eyes were staring right ahead at the stage and Matthew was surprised he hadn't seen her sooner. Or perhaps, she had been around and everyone knew it but him.

As far as he knew, she had moved away a while ago and must only be here for obvious reasons. Matthew knew how he felt about her. When she was fine she was fine, tolerable even. She had a nice side that had always made him feel conflicted about everything else...

But if he was speaking 'Matthew's' truth, he was never comfortable around her. She had always been disrespectful and pushy and when Francis had been set on trying to 'get' him, she had encouraged it and frothed at how 'cute' it was.

It wasn't.

So it was lucky for her that she had moved away because had his rage come across her on the streets when he was first starting out... well, he was sure it would all depend on what went down in the moment.

Beside her was Lili, who had her legs pulled up to her chest as she leaned into the brunette. It was strange seeing her there only because the picture wasn't complete without *Basch*, who never left his sister's side... Matthew knew how insanely overprotective he was about her, so was she the missing link? It was a stretch to think that Basch was the Copycat at all, even with the thought that he was making a statement about how the police had failed to keep the city safe.

But to kill Roderich? Not only did Lili like him, but he was his cousin's cousin... and Matthew knew Basch had history with him. Complicated history that in truth, could swing either way as a reason to either bury him or be unable to hurt him.

"Man, you too?" Alfred grumbled at his phone and Matthew looked to see he was texting Kiku... who had apparently come with his brother and wasn't comfortable pushing his way through the crowd to meet up with them. "Pussy."

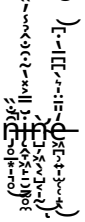
"It's okay, you can see him after," Matthew offered, hoping that was enough to make Alfred reel it in. His brother huffed and hesitated responding when officers started to take the stage.

"Alright, let's strap in, ay?" Steve slumped in his seat and crossed his arms.

Chapter End Notes

I found some more cool stuff on tumblr!
mister-amarillo | https://www.tumblr.com/mister-amarillo/798539422363762688/hetatober-day-15-au-based-on-the-fic-the?source=share
slugbug444 | https://www.tumblr.com/slugbug444/788186526385405952/hetalia-textposts-but-theyre-based-on-the-shadow?source=share
romanotomatonyan | https://www.tumblr.com/romanotomatonyan/798616437803679744/art-i-did-for-a-fanfic-its-the-shadow-by?source=share
me | https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/812291879286849536/heres-the-next-addition-to-my-poster-series-based?source=share

Also, holy shit. This fic has over 1000 comments! Thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts, it's always so thrilling to see what people have to say and feeds into the hype ❤



Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

I did a lot of research for this and unfortunately it is based on US practices (US defaultilism goes brr) but ultimately I don't think it matters.

Also the chapter is a two-part so I could perfect the next part :/ womp womp. But it did come a little early as a compromise! You're welcome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the crowd's volume fell instantly, the mood plummeted, and a heavy feeling settled in. Matthew followed the group's lead as they all sat down, ignoring Alfred's shuffling in his seat. Next to him, Steve was shooting a quick text on his phone before glancing over his shoulder and giving a curt wave. Matthew glanced back and saw that Zach was here after all, sandwiched between two strangers and giving a curt wave back.

Past them, Tino was focusing intensely, scanning his eyes over the stage like he was searching for something and somehow not distracted by Mathias and Lukas muttering. From the way Lukas had a hand tensed on Mathias' upper arm, it seemed he was threatening him and coercing him into behaving.

Matthew didn't know if it was a bad idea to be sitting right at the front. Even if it gave him a good view, it meant the police had a good view of *him*, let alone he couldn't see what was behind him without making it obvious. It would be suspicious to move now and he cursed his instinct to run after Alfred in the first place. Because when his brother ran, he chased, otherwise he'd be left behind. He was left behind anyway.

Matthew spared a brief glance at Basch at the very end of the row, his arms crossed and a look of trepidation.

Some officers in dress uniforms took to the stage and set up the final chairs there, off-centre beside the veiled statue. Whispers could be heard, increasing in volume when the crowd realised it wasn't beginning immediately. The whispers continued when officers began putting unlit candles and photos of the victims, *his victims*, in front of those chairs and arranging flowers around them. A banner decorated with the words 'in remembrance' was hung from the stage in front of it all.

Everyone could see what he had done.

It was interesting that they didn't have it set up earlier and Matthew glanced around carefully. Officially or not, the event had started. The media knew it too, hovering around the edges of the rows upon rows of chairs, their cameras already set up and sweeping over the stage and crowd. Matthew didn't let his gaze linger.

He knew it would be easy to blend in because it always had been. There was nothing special about him and somehow, everyone knew it. So who would pay attention when he was so unexceptional

and *boring*? He was nothing more than a support character. Another grieving face in the crowd, a role that he could play well. After all, his personality was nothing more than the result of everything he had endured, leaving him as a dull and lifeless husk with no potential to thrive like anyone around him.

But that was alright. He gave himself a purpose now and if it was to live in the shadows, then so be it. At least he got to live. At least now, he had a story that set him apart from everyone else.

The Chief took to the stage, heading straight for the podium with the city crest and setting his papers down with a sense of finality as he surveyed the crowd. Matthew lowered his eyes. Now it really was beginning. Matthew glanced back down at Basch, but he still seemed his usual standoffish self... until the music began playing.

A slow, instrumental version of Amazing Grace began to play from a nearby speaker as the Chief asked everyone to stand. From the way Basch recoiled, Matthew had a feeling that this was probably one of Roderich's pieces and could be a way to get a reaction from the Copycat.

Which begged the question: did the Copycat even care for Roderich? Or was he simply a means to an end and it was nothing personal at all? Just a way to get the Chief's attention? Matthew didn't know which he preferred, but it still caused him to tense while thinking about it and how he was robbed of the opportunity for himself.

He didn't care to linger on that when a group of people were led to sit on the chairs on the stage. Matthew recognised quite a few of them. Even if he didn't, he knew *exactly* who they were meant to be with half of them were fighting tears.

"*Dude*." Alfred jerked a hand in gesture when he saw Ivan and his sister sitting up there.

As the families of the diseased were escorted on the stage and surrounding chairs, Matthew could see exactly who Alfred was desperately hoping to see. His eyes paused on Gilbert, who looked like he didn't even want to be there as he guzzled water. There were plenty of others he recognised and wondered why he didn't think of seeing them sooner. Now, Matthew just looked forward to what was coming even more.

More officers followed behind them and stood behind the families.

"Since when was this a police event?" Alfred muttered and Matthew made a short noise in response. From what he knew of Gilbert's grandfather, he was just as ruthless as he was controlling. He probably strong-armed his way into being the one behind this event.

"Oh my God, um," Alfred jerked his hand again at the redhead on stage, holding a piece of paper with a distant look. "*Goddammit*, whatever. Shrek's here."

Matthew knew exactly what he meant by his stumbling of words and lapse in memory. Steve gave a brief whistle and a sombre wave while the hushed whispers between Lukas and Mathias were almost loud enough to make out when they drew Tino into the mix. If Matthew strained, he could hear them discussing why Peter wasn't up there.

The audience remained standing until the Chief placed a police hat and badge on the only unoccupied chair, Gilbert's weary eyes following every movement. The Chief didn't say anything about it, instead just asking everyone to sit.

It was time.

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The Chief began with some opening remarks in welcome, never straying from the solemn tone that was suffocating everyone on the stage. He thanked those attending and those who collaborated, then acknowledged the families in his usual professional manner that could make someone believe he was good at keeping everything together. His voice was steady, but his eye contact was a little intense, as if he was personally accusing every person here of being a monster.

Maybe he was only doing so well because he was reading a script. One that focused on what the community had lost and the innocent lives they were collectively mourning. Insisting that today was about remembrance without even mentioning the fear that united them.

Matthew had always been observant. He could hear the euphemisms, what wasn't being said and the careful rephrasing that made this feel different. The Chief was doing his best to dance around the fact that today was only possible because of the Trail Killer.

Obviously, it was a ploy. There was no way it was because the Chief actually wasn't keeping everything together and had to deny reality. There must be a reason for not mentioning the elephant in the room and Matthew was reminded of the media blackout before Ludwig's death. All to deny him what he wanted to see. That wouldn't be happening. He was very satisfied seeing this unfold now and spitefully hoped that it was making the Copycat feel something. Maybe then he would spot something he identified with.

But it raised the question... how long would the Copycat tolerate going unrecognised? If the Copycat didn't kill Roderich for personal reasons, then he killed him for his connection to the Chief.

Would he go after Gilbert next?

Matthew bit the inside of his cheek as the Chief finally fisted the sheet over the statue and, after a moment of hesitation, he pulled it down. It was a smooth monolith with names etched into the front.

There were... a lot. Matthew was sitting too far away to read them individually, but if he squinted, he could count how many of them there were. His eyes flicked back to those mourning the dead, sitting on the stage or in the chairs beside it, a small crowd in their own right. He had never thought that he'd impact that many people and seeing just the sheer amount of crumbling faces collected in one place left him in awe of himself.

He had forgotten the joy of seeing those closest to his victims react, especially when in the early days the benefit was like two birds, one stone. He took his wrath out on someone he hated, someone who deserved it, and then those around that person suffered too, because even if they didn't deserve death, they weren't innocent.

Now that he was reminiscing on it, he really missed seeing the impact firsthand from the perch in the cage he had been confined to. Sure, he still left things to crumble in Alfred's life and in the lives of his friends, but watching it unfold was something else and something he lost when he started chasing fame.

After taking a purposeful breath, the Chief then began to read out the names of each individual from the podium.

"Arthur Kirkland, 23, devoted brother; Francis Bonnefoy, 26, beautiful soul; Lovino Vargas, 23, passionate individual; Natalya Arloŭskaja, 19, beloved sister..."

With each name, an officer lit the candle in front of the corresponding picture of the victim. With so many photo frames gathered together, it was almost hard to imagine that he had killed so many people. But now visualising his impact like this made something grow in his chest. Something that made just sitting there a hard task as sweat beaded along his back.

He just couldn't believe how *many* of them there were! He knew there had been a lot but now that it was compiled into a list, he was impressed. Even now, with the blatant reminder, he couldn't believe how far his influence had really gone and to what scale his impact had undeniably reached. Now his worries about fading into obscurity looked completely unfounded and this memorial alone was a great reminder that he was not only notable, but he should be confident because just by being here he saw how others perceive him. How others saw the Trail Killer outside of what Matthew thought or how Alfred acted.

The Chief continued to read names and while Matthew didn't recognise them, he knew that this was all leading up to his last known notable victim... despite killing others after Ludwig, Matthew had a feeling that the Chief was going to use some artistic liberty to make this event as impactful as possible.

He was right.

The Chief paused before the last name was read out. *Ludwig's*. There was no way of knowing if it was intentional or involuntary, but there was a shift on stage. Matthew felt as though the crowd wasn't there and the Chief was speaking directly to him. All the uniformed officers shifted and straightened because a line was drawn without being spoken. Every single one of them knew that something had been done that couldn't be taken back and it had finally gone too far. Even though it had gone off the rails since and was still going further.

When Ludwig's name was read, the Chief also listed his rank and years of service... which was depressingly short. Then, without a word, the Chief stepped away from the podium and knelt by the frames of all those dearly departed and lit the last candle himself.

Matthew watched it all unfold, his attention sharp as he took it all in. Everyone's eyes were on the Chief, who hardly looked like a formidable man when he was kneeling. Matthew could see the reactions of the families by the stage and spared a glance around him. There were faces that he couldn't see that he desperately wanted to. He knew the Copycat was here and it was moments like this that he was certain he'd be able to spot him *if he could just see him*.

Still, as the Chief lingered by his grandson's portrait before slowly standing, Matthew couldn't tear himself away from the families and friends past the railing. He knew the faces of those connected to his earliest victims - the ones that he personally took joy in ending. Nostalgia swelled as he observed the varied looks on their faces; some were crying, others were not. Either because they were succeeding in holding it in or because sadness wasn't the most prominent emotion wracking them in this moment. A few looked like they were dissociating, though it was hard to say if that was the look Gilbert had in his eyes right now. They looked glazed and droopy. He fumbled as he took a long drink.

The Chief returned to the podium and wrapped up by acknowledging all of the victims, like he hadn't given his grandson special acknowledgement. Matthew supposed that Chief Beilschimdt was just a grieving grandfather at the end of the day.

"One of our own was taken while trying to stop this violence. That is why I am standing before you now to make sure that all of these innocent lives don't end here."

Matthew sucked in a breath because, finally, something that could pass as a reference to him. So far, the Chief hadn't outright acknowledged his existence and while it bothered him, he knew that every single person in this crowd knew why they were here. It was because of *him*, and they knew it too, despite what the Chief was too cowardly to say. Though he knew calling it cowardice was misleading... if anything, it proved that he had pushed the Chief into a corner where he had to watch his every word carefully.

Good. So now even the most powerful man in the city knew what it was like to walk on eggshells. It might not be for the same reason that Matthew had to, but it produced the same results. It meant that he wasn't particularly weak for succumbing to everyone's pressure when he just wanted to belong.

"All the names I read are on the face, so they will not be obscured by darkness or forgotten. It is a tragedy, but this honours the memory of these victims ... and those who have lost their lives despite our best efforts. Since the making of this monument, a few others have pointlessly suffered brutality and died, including my other Grandson, Roderich Edelstein."

The Chief then listed those the Copycat killed and their portraits were assembled with the others, all with a candle and a flame. Matthew glanced over at Gilbert, who wasn't even looking at the stage. He kept chugging mouthfuls and leaning so far on his knees that his head was basically between them.

Was he going to be sick? It looked like it was possible from the sheen of sweat clinging to his flushed face.

Matthew's concentration was broken when he heard some muffled exclamations of excitement that caused him to twist to find the source. Mathias plastered his hand over his mouth even as Lukas pinched him and unapologetically continued to urgently point at what had caught his attention.

Well, at *who*.

Lurking behind the stage with some other officers standing at attention, *Berwald* fell into line beside them.

Matthew had to admit... this was interesting. It was equally intriguing as it was worrying. While he wasn't close to Berwald at all, he was still close *enough* that he knew of him. He wasn't just another face in the crowd; he was an acquaintance and an actual character in Matthew's life and therefore a variable. Someone to keep an eye on.

Did Berwald sign up to be an officer when Arthur died and he took on Peter? That seemed like the most obvious answer because he couldn't comprehend any other motivation. Matthew studied the man, taking note of how professional he looked, even if he didn't look entirely in his element. From the way he was dressed, Matthew wasn't sure if he was a regular officer. If he were one, would he really be out now, in broad daylight, when he would have a long night ahead of him tonight?

Though if he did, that would explain why he wasn't present at Roderich's street memorial that morning.

Unless he was here, because he was actually involved in the case...

Matthew would have to find out.

Berwald had spotted them and the only indication that he had come from the tightening of his shoulders and a flicker of his eyes. Clearly, he didn't want to make a show, which must've been the reasoning for his expression darkening and narrowing on Mathias, like he was telling him off without a word.

Matthew glanced back at Tino and Lukas, who didn't seem surprised in the slightest and were more concerned with shutting Mathias up. There was no way to count on Gilbert to get inside information about the police investigation... but perhaps this new development came with a new route. But once he considered it, he knew it wasn't going to be possible at all. Berwald wasn't the talkative type as it was, and Matthew didn't feel confident getting in with that clique-y group. Even being Peter's cousin, he couldn't think of any 'in' there and it would be more effort than it was worth when he wanted to find the Copycat as soon as possible.

It seemed he wasn't the only one who noticed Mathias' reaction, because Matthew felt a chill go through him and his stomach dropped.

Chief Beilschmidt was staring right at them.

Matthew's chest seized. He held his breath as he glanced back at the others and saw Tino smiling apologetically at the Chief.

It all happened in the blink of an eye and when the Chief continued on as if nothing had happened, Matthew let that breath out and stifled his irritation at Mathias for causing a whole scene.

Once he found the Copycat and eliminated him, he was certainly going to go through with his plan. Mathias, Ivan, then Gilbert. He set his jaw as he glared at the Chief and his sunglasses hid his expression. How couldn't he resent the man when he could control him with only a look? Matthew never wanted to succumb to someone else's dominance again. All he had to do was bide his time...

The Chief called for a moment of silence.

If it wasn't quiet before, it was deadly eerie now. A few people were crying openly, but he was sure they were before the silence and now it was only amplified with nothing else to focus on. Matthew knew better than to look around now, because the silence was an opportunity for the police to observe them when there was nothing to react to other than the aftermath.

Matthew eyed Berwald, who had his own eyes on the ground and looked like his thoughts were far away. Then Matthew turned to Gilbert, who was leaning back in his chair and staring at the sky while one arm swung by his side. Feliciano caught it and tangled their hands together as his eyes watered. Antonio tried to snatch the water bottle away but Gilbert elbowed his hand and continued drinking. The Spaniard had always been a patient, easy-going person with a persistent positive attitude, and Matthew always wished it had turned his way. But today it seemed that Antonio was completely spent with the way he scowled pleadingly and desperately at his friend. He almost looked angry and it was understandable when Gilbert ignored him.

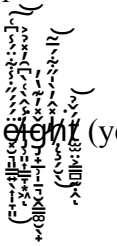
There was wind, distant traffic and other city noises. Matthew wondered how long this moment would last because it was starting to stretch. But he didn't mind in the slightest because silence was never empty for him. It was something he had been confined to his whole life, and now it was a second home and a graveyard he owned. He wanted to know what the Copycat was doing now and he reset his jaw as he tried not to look around because he was sure the Copycat would be doing the same.

The Copycat wanted this, didn't he? Not just to experience, but for himself... Matthew's breath hitched as he thought about how much more desperate the other killer would be at night. Matthew would need to be prepared... for anything. For the worst.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is officially over 200k long! I can and can't believe it!

Some fanart I made! > https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/813416737053851648/this-poster-is-about-the-vigilantes-taking-to-the?source=share



~~omg~~ (yes I forgot to add this, I can't believe it smh)

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

I saw the dog on a tucker box

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silence only broke when the Chief announced it was time to hear a short eulogy for each victim, insisting that their memories would live on with hostile determination. Matthew eagerly glanced at those seated on the stage, trying to appraise how they felt about this. Were all of them being forced to perform? Or were some there of their own volition?

Matthew was once again brought back to a time when just being moved by people's responses to what he had caused was more satisfying than anything in the world. Even just imagining it had been enough for him. But of course, nothing compared to actually seeing it. It was captivating and made his empty chest feel something. He felt bad for those sitting shrunken and defeated on the stage, though he knew it was just because he could relate to being in such a powerless position. Clearly, the Chief had the families and friends up there on display to evoke a reaction.

Matthew had to admit that he achieved exactly that. Too bad the Chief didn't count on the fact that the Trail Killer had years of experience suppressing his emotions because no one cared to witness them. Now he was here, witnessing everything today had to offer without letting a single soul in on the secret that it was all for him.

The first stood up, and that familiar, lanky redhead took to the podium. The sun made it look like his hair was on fire as he discarded a piece of paper on the stand like he was putting out a butt on the pavement.

Matthew was taken back to the very beginning.

"Fuck, I can't picture him when not smoking," Alfred muttered.

"I don't think he would've been allowed to," Matthew quickly replied.

All he could see was Arthur's naked expression as he held his neck and dropped to his knees... how he had finally been put in his place. Matthew had finally accepted that he had lost parts of him that made him whole, that they had been chipped away and when he held the knife that day, all that remained was the monster he had become.

"Name's Alasdair," their cousin's casual and teasing voice was replaced by something heavier. "And I'm here to speak on behalf of my wee brother."

Matthew hadn't seen him since Arthur's funeral and now that he was standing here, the composure was starkly different. Here, Alasdair resembled more of what Matthew remembered him for. Even if the weight on his shoulders was still evident, he had barely been able to deliver a coherent eulogy at the funeral. That was a surprise and entirely intriguing because Matthew had never seen him fall apart like that before.

"I would'a thought he'd lose some pub scuffle over a football game." Alasdair let out an amused huff, his lips briefly twitching as something fond flashed in his eyes. It flickered out. "I can't believe he's gone."

"Fuck man, I wish I brought water," Alfred's voice sounded watery as he shuffled in his seat and subtly cleared his throat. Matthew hoped that wouldn't attract more attention to them. "I really need water."

Matthew didn't have anything to say because suggesting he wait would only meet backlash, but there was no other reasonable solution. He just habitually grunted in reply.

"He had a nurturing side behind that obsessively controlling facade," Alasdair continued. "He took on Peter when our Mam died."

That was rough for Peter, being handed around like a game of pass the parcel. Matthew was sure the reason Alasdair didn't take him was some personal choice on his cousin's behalf, something likely along the lines of lifestyle. Considering Matthew didn't have the best opinion of his abrasive cousin, he thought it was for the best that Peter was taken in by someone like Tino.

"I suppose I miss him," Alasdair had been doing so well until now, when his voice choked and his words strained. But despite that, he carried on. "There's no reason he shouldn't be here..."

He grabbed his paper from the stand and held it limply as he returned to his seat, fingers twitching and rubbing by his side as he stared off into the horizon.

Before he spoke at the funeral, Matthew had really thought that Alasdair would be happy about what happened. Alasdair *hated* Arthur...

But Matthew *hated* Roderich, and the Copycat got to him first. Matthew *loathed* Alfred... but wouldn't let the Copycat take him too. So he supposed he understood. Staking a claim and being resistant to change were familiar things... Alfred was *his* and if something, *anything* took him away before Matthew could-

Before he could what? Fuck, he didn't know. But he knew his brother belonged to him and he needed him if only to validate all the suffering he went through for so long.

"Fuck, now I feel bad for not calling him or something," Alfred kept bringing his hand to his hair and if his endless shifting wasn't enough to tip off that he was unsettled, his constant murmuring did it. Matthew tried to ignore it but it still annoyed him. Always having to run commentary and ruin it for everyone...

Before Matthew could let his attitude get worse, he considered what he could say to make Alfred quiet. Maybe if he repeated Tino's sentiment of being here to be supportive, or just reminding Alfred that others were here to mourn...

That thought perished when Antonio stepped up to speak and Alfred let out a strangled gasp.

"No fucking way, did that asshole really rope poor Toni into this?" Alfred's voice was shrill, even for a whisper.

Matthew glanced between his twin and Antonio introducing himself at the podium. Feelings of annoyance were still bubbling up because, of course Alfred was making his feelings known. He

always did. But wasn't that part of why he kept going in the first place? He *should* be enjoying Alfred's reactions because after all, that's part of what drove him to begin all of this. He had no voice but he still needed to scream and be heard. He wanted to know how Alfred felt and now that was being delivered to him on a silver platter.

Still, couldn't Alfred just contain it for just one event?

Antonio started to speak, trying to keep a smile on his face as his lips fought to turn up without turning into a grimace.

Matthew never expected the Chief to make Antonio speak for Francis, but he loved this turn of events. By having Francis' best friend paint him in such a loving light, the thousands of people here today would never know the truth.

That Francis was better off gone.

Matthew pictured it, *felt it*, as he held that knife and cut Francis off. Silencing him and the *spew* that ran from his mouth. How good it finally felt to stand up for himself and correct him as he put Francis in his place, never to feel cornered again. Leaving him crumpled and alone, like he was destined to be.

"He had a romanticised view of life and was like a light in a dark room. He really was too good for this world and he made everything fun."

Every word that came out of Antonio's mouth sounded like it belonged to someone else. What he was saying sounded like it was coming from the heart but it also sounded so unlike the Spaniard in delivery. Matthew was reminded of the two of them standing on that bridge so long ago now... how Matthew had really been moved to consider slaughtering Antonio as a favour, all to put him out of his misery.

They had all changed because of Matthew's actions, and they didn't even know who to credit. Only who to blame.

"He may have been a bad influence on me, but he was my brother," Antonio chuckled weakly, his nervous hands causing the paper to flutter. "I'm not going to forget that and I can't- ah, *won't* forget him."

As far as Matthew knew, Antonio was more than comfortable in the spotlight. Although that apparently had changed. The Spaniard scurried back to his seat and Alfred tensed when Feliciano reluctantly stood. Matthew watched as Feliciano lingered and turned to his friends before making his way to the podium, tears already trickling faint tracks down his cheeks by the time he took his place. He blinked rapidly and pulled his paper closer as his lips trembled.

Once again, Matthew felt pity for the Italian, but reasoned he was being thoroughly compensated with care by everyone around him. Hopefully, the Chief was only making Feliciano speak for just his brother and not his *boyfriend* as well. Though with the remaining grandson here, it looked like Matthew was going to see a repeat of Ludwig's funeral. Gilbert's grandfather seemed oblivious to the way Gilbert looked like he was about to throw up on stage.

Feliciano spared a glance back at the albino, but Antonio just made a wave of encouragement with his hand while biting back a grimace.

Maybe Feliciano would've been better off if his boyfriend was still around. They weren't exactly a pretentious couple by any means, but the Italian made it obvious that Ludwig was on a pedestal and was the greatest comfort that could ever exist.

Matthew couldn't comprehend feeling that way about someone... or ever having someone feel that way about him. It was so completely foreign... but not the grief that there was a gaping hole that could never be filled by what he was lacking.

Ludwig was good for Feliciano... but his brother was not. If Feliciano had only lost the bad influence on his life, then maybe he wouldn't be so completely broken now because he would still have someone who adored him. But it was a pity that Ludwig would've only been more motivated to find the Trail Killer for Feliciano's sake.

Matthew wondered how Lovino would've reacted to Ludwig's death, whether or not he would've put his facade down for five seconds to comfort his brother. It was likely he would, but Matthew didn't know if he would have stayed comforting after those five seconds were up. Lovino wasn't exactly known for his patience or compassion.

"Um, I'm Feliciano... and if you didn't know, Lovino was my twin brother... identical... if that matters..." Feliciano sniffled loudly and scrubbed at his face with his sleeve.

Maybe Matthew was just being cynical. After all, Lovino loved his brother so much. The only respect Matthew could give him came right at the end, when Lovino only fought because he couldn't pass without knowing his twin was safe. It had been so moving and outright... bizarre, if only because Matthew had only seen something like that play out in a movie. He thought that kind of devotion to a connection was crafted by Hollywood to sell an idea, but maybe he was wrong. What if it wasn't manufactured at all and people really felt that way about each other? As much as he hated seeing people on screen connect so deeply in a way that could only be fake, he hated the idea that it was real *more*.

Because it really meant he was missing out... everyone had someone, and he had no one. He was no one's favourite person. No one would choose him first. He didn't have someone who was his and he was no one's.

Lovino belonged with Feliciano, and Feliciano belonged with his brother.

Alfred didn't even want to know Matthew. Matthew spared his brother a glance, gaze lingering on his twisted face and tense hands. Alfred would drop anything for anyone, but couldn't care less that he didn't come into this world alone.

"We were born together and I suppose one day we were going to have to..." Feliciano scrubbed harder before consulting the paper. "That one of us would go before the other. But we weren't meant to think about that for a few more decades..."

It ached that Feliciano couldn't see that he was better off without his brother. Matthew never expected it to be easy, but surely at some point the Italian would realise how toxic Lovino was and how his negativity was suffocating. How Lovino demanded and demeaned and used Feliciano as a doormat...

And Feliciano gave. He was positive to no end and took it all with a smile. Matthew had been the same. He had always been nice to survive when he was a child, and now that he was an adult left alone out in the cold, he knew that wasn't enough to cut it.

At least now, Feliciano would never have to blame himself again and never question if he was at fault whenever Lovino mistreated him.

Matthew tried to keep his reaction to his thoughts to a minimum, but he knew his inner turmoil would just pass as grief. Because that's what it was, *grief*. For the life he could never have because he was given this one and the person he could never become, because what flower blooms without love and care?

"Decades that we'll never have together-" No matter how much Feliciano rubbed his face, tears kept coming faster than he could deal with as he began to sob. Yet through heaving breath, he kept stumbling over his words as his voice broke. "I know whoever did this might be listening..." His chest was shuddering and Matthew held his breath as he was finally acknowledged and Feliciano forced the last few words to leave his throat.

"*...please leave*."

Feliciano took one shaky step from the podium, wide eyes darting from the crowd to the other speakers on the stage before falling onto the rest of the victim's loved ones and in the blink of an eye, made his decision. He ran off the stage and jumped, flying right into his grandpa's arms.

Beside him, Alfred was rubbing at his own face and gasping quietly like he was trying to force his own weakness back. On the stage, the Chief followed the movement but didn't have any discernible expression. Matthew wondered why Feliciano was the one put up to the task and not his grandfather. Sure, Lovino was his twin brother and Feliciano was undeniably cute and sympathetic, and no doubt wanting to do anything Ludwig would approve of, but Augustus had a famous face and was widely known. Why wouldn't he insist that he speak for his grandson? Matthew had already seen Feliciano weep and Ludwig's funeral, but now he wanted to see what face Augustus would pull when his facade fell.

It took a moment for the next speaker to stand, a woman Matthew was only acquainted with. Yet he held her in high enough regard to say he liked her. After all, why wouldn't he? She was another soul who was indiscriminately kind to everyone and didn't have any sort of power to abuse. If anything, she was so stupidly earnest even when others disregarded her at best and picked on her at worst.

Her resolve was evident as she stepped up to the podium, but she looked like she could break at any moment, just like Feliciano.

Matthew remembered Natalya... he remembered how she looked like she wanted to claw his eyes out. It wasn't a foreign look on her at all, but it was the first time it had ever been directed at *him*. Because on that day, he had made himself noticed and shown her exactly what he thought of her cruelty.

"Hi everyone, thanks for coming today and being so supportive. It means a lot," the sister managed to hold eye contact with the crowd for a moment before flittering back down to her paper. "My name is Iryna and I'm the oldest of three. All I have is my siblings, so family is very important to me."

Iryna swallowed thickly, eyes skimming the paper as she prepared to continue.

"My sister, Natalya, was more than what people liked to see her as. She was never a violent person; she didn't want attention or want to be remembered like this. She just cared for her family and depended on us for so much and now we feel like we let her down," Iryna cleared her throat as it

began to waver. "We will only remember her and not what happened to her because she never deserved something like that."

Matthew really wished these speeches were longer because they were all being wrapped up way too soon. He didn't get the privilege of going to all his victims' funerals, and now he was starting to realise he really missed out...

Once Iryna sat, someone took her place and the speeches continued. One after another, strangers introduced themselves and spoke. Every single one of them was personal, but *mostly* restrained. He wondered if the ones that weren't were the ones that were supposed to catch him out. Each eulogy was no more than a minute and as they continued, he started to find them repetitive as they all had the same gist. But despite that, Matthew still looked forward to hearing each and every one.

Because even if they only focused on the victim and not the gore that led to their name being etched in stone, Matthew still got insight into the carnage he had left behind. As did everyone who came here today.

His name would not be erased from the cultural zeitgeist anytime soon.

And as each secondary victim said their piece, all Matthew could see when he closed his eyes was who they were talking about. He never had names for them and he felt a little bad that so many random people became collateral, but if the Chief's goal was to make him regret what he did, then it wasn't going to work.

Because he didn't regret doing what he had to. He was successful.

As one by one, everyone took their turn, Matthew couldn't help but count down until the last person took to the stage... Gilbert.

The albino was off to a bad start when he missed his cue and a moment of silence fell over the waiting crowd. Before the Chief could do anything, Antonio shook Gilbert's shoulder and snatched the water bottle as he prompted him to stand.

Then it really was downhill from there.

Gilbert stumbled up to the podium, gripping the side with one hand while the other fumbled with his paper as he flipped it a few times before finally settling on the 'right' side.

And then he opened his mouth.

It really, truly, was for the best that Ludwig couldn't see him now.

"I'm Ludwig's Beilschimdt's *awesome* big brother," he grinned as he tilted towards the crowd, leaning heavily on the podium as he breathed into the mic. It was immediately noticeable that his accent was more pronounced. "And he was awesome too."

The Chief's shoulders heaved like he was sighing as he glanced to the side. It was the first time Matthew could recall him looking away or showing any emotion at all.

"Ludwig didn't talk about work much," Gilbert's already abrasive voice was only amplified by the mic, making it loud and aggressive as he read from the paper with an unnatural inflection. "He just

wanted to show up to do something that mattered because even though he was really serious, *ha*, like *way* too serious, he was one of the kindest people you'd meet."

He was a lot more than just kind, but that didn't matter now. Ludwig wasn't smart enough to see him coming. Mathias had said the quiet part out loud and even if he was punished for it, Matthew knew everyone knew he was right. Ludwig had been just as blind as everyone else around him.

Gilbert paused when he hiccuped and scanned the paper with a lost expression. His grandfather crossed his arms with a look of resignation but didn't move to interfere.

"He never held a grudge for lang und always forgived everyone," it was hard to know if Gilbert was using the script or not, or if it was some combination of impulse that flickered between. "I don't know why he was taken from us."

The Chief stepped forward, as if that was his cue to take over and continue with the memorial proceedings, but Gilbert just drummed his fingers on the wood as his expression darkened and he glowered at the crowd with an almost sadistic cackle.

"And to the *arschloch* who's probably eavesdropping right now," Gilbert bore his teeth as his grin turned maniacal, a facetious look shimmered in his eyes. "You've taken *mein* best friend *und mein Bruder und mein cousin*..." his teeth almost looked like fangs with the way his mouth was grinning tautly.

"*Please don't take my Grandfather too*."

His eyes darted from the audience right to the man standing beside him, completely aware and uncaring that his Grandfather was *pissed*. If anything, it made the gleam in his eyes brighter.

Matthew couldn't help but lean forward ever so slightly as he watched the Chief escort his grandson to the back of the stage and pass him off to another officer, who held him firmly by the arm. Matthew knew that Gilbert would be more than just sleep-deprived and aching with agony inside and out, and yet it it was compelling to see him act like he always did. Feral and unrestrained...

Did the Chief see Gilbert for the burden he was?

Alfred was practically hissing beside him and Matthew could see his fists were clenched, no doubt imagining jumping in to save his friend like some sort of glorious, unrealistic hero.

The Chief resumed his place at the podium, with his usual professional composure as he wrapped up the eulogies and thanked those who gave them. Matthew realised that none of the Copycat's victims had been given eulogies... no doubt to deprive him of the satisfaction of hearing them entirely. The Copycat *and* him.

"To honour these lives and embrace remembrance, each family member will put out each candle as a symbolic way of saying goodbye."

Someone stepped forward for each victim and blew out the flames with varying degrees of apathy and agony. Alasdair... a young woman reminiscent of Francis... Augustus while holding Feliciano... Ivan and Iryna...

Matthew couldn't help but feel that this part of the ceremony was directed at him. This ritual existed because of him and he preferred it over guns being used, unlike whatever Alfred was

mumbling about, apparently expecting a military salute and glad they weren't going to do that. Matthew agreed, but admitting that out loud would never happen when Matthew had been punished his whole life for being sensitive.

When it came to Ludwig's candle, Gilbert tugged at the arm holding him and a look of surprise crossed his face as his grandfather stepped forward instead. Clearly, that wasn't the plan.

It really would've been nice if the Chief explicitly mentioned the Trail Killer at any point, even if it was in anger. Matthew wanted to feel the whole crowd's reaction because so far, he hadn't really felt the public from beyond a screen. Shame, but this memorial was certainly filling enough. Maybe in the future, he would try and lurk where he knew people would talk. He needed to hear what people were saying and how they felt.

But it was inevitable that Alfred and his friends would hang around after and he could eavesdrop then, because he knew his legacy would be whispered once it was concealed by the crowd.

He couldn't wait.

The Chief said some closing remarks, seeming to really rile up the community spirit while sticking to a clinical tone as if his statements were mere observations. He kept speaking as if everyone felt the same about today... Matthew did not. Neither would the Copycat. Once the audience was dismissed, that was Matthew's opportunity to spot him.

After everything he saw today, it was impossible not to feel invigorated. He wanted to kill the Copycat and he didn't want to rush it like he knew he would have to. After all, you could only kill someone once and it was something he had to make the most of. Thinking about how he could make it work both ways was stressful because he needed to make sure the Copycat died quickly. Otherwise, if the police interfered in time, they might get information from him. But on the other hand, Matthew wanted nothing more than to drag out an encounter and see what the Copycat's reaction would be as Matthew revealed everything.

He would have to orchestrate something in his favour. Something that allowed him to get exactly what he wanted and craved. Just daydreaming about it now nearly brought him the same amount of satisfaction as today's show. He was living for the thought of preparing for it, to be the one to snatch everything away from the police and vigilantes by putting an end to the Copycat. Not that the vigilantes would even know and continue to chase shadows.

Then the moment Matthew had been waiting for came, because the Chief couldn't avoid it forever. With a twitch of his eyebrow, the Chief said, "This person will be brought to account", and Matthew's jaw tightened to prevent anything showing. Interesting that the Chief didn't make any promises... was he trying to make the killer believe that the police were incapable, or was that a slip?

Chapter End Notes

Listen, I like Scotland's canonical design... but I LOVE the fanon one so we're going with that.

Poster I made > https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/814473966938898432/this-poster-shows-matthews-obsession-with?source=share

Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

> Author lore: I finally told my best friend irl about my 'secret hobby', which is writing this fic. My best friend was actually really supportive and extremely amused by how famous I am. I didn't think I was famous but then when asked how many hits this fic had, I realised it was enough to fill a stadium and now it's a joke that I'm famous even if I can't really wrap my head around it. My best friend is also slowly reading this fic despite having never actually watched any anime or read any fic before, so is going in fandom blind and says it's an entertaining read so far. So 'A', if you make it to this chapter, I just want to let you know I appreciate you <3
> I should probably stop treating my author notes like a personal diary if so many people are reading this. Now I'm starting to feel a little paranoid.
>
> But back to the fic. You guys are in for a treat, I managed to bring someone in early 😈

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as the obligation to stay silent was gone, chatter erupted. Mathias didn't even hesitate to verbally pounce on Tino, and even though the volume of the chatter drowned him out, Matthew knew it was about Berwald's new job. Matthew was annoyed that he couldn't make out everything they were saying word for word, but he heard enough. Tino, Lukas, and Emil all apparently knew and collectively kept it from Mathias. In all honesty, Matthew thought that was deserved.

"That was intense, hey?" Steve slumped in his seat. "Hopefully, everyone feels better now they've got that done."

"Doubt it," Alfred scoffed as he sank into his seat, his eyes lingering on his friends past the railing. No doubt he was waiting around for them.

Matthew glanced around, feeling as though now was the right time to get a good look at the crowd without being suspicious. Whoever the Copycat was... he'd likely linger. Matthew wanted to stay at Roderich's street memorial for reasons more than just spotting his killer...

The first person he checked was Basch. Basch was still seated, arms crossed and staring at the stage. He was in deep thought and either remembering those who died or waiting for something. But either way, it was odd that he wasn't immediately trying to reunite with his sister. Matthew couldn't picture him without his hand in hers, so something had to be up...

"Do youse know where Roderich's thingo is?" Steve straightened up as he addressed the group. "I was gonna check it out before comin' 'ere but I figured no worries, I'd make an adventure of finding it after." He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe after finding a bottle-o so I could leave something nice for the bloke."

"I can text you the directions if you like?" Tino offered.

"Or I can take you there after," Mathias proposed.

"Either or, I'm not too fussed," Steve pulled out his phone. "Lemme call Zee, we got separated but eh, he's a big boy so yeah nah she'll be alright."

Alfred just groaned as he rubbed his face vigorously and his eyes landed on the supermarket on the other side of the railing.

"Man, I hope they let us past cus I'm so fucking thirsty," he complained. "At least then I'll be able to make sure the others are alright... ish."

"I wouldn't hold your breath," Lukas stated.

"Man, fuck that," Alfred slouched in resignation as he waved his hand forward. "Well when they open up at least we'll be by a store, which'll sell alcohol."

"Well, that's perfect!" Steve exclaimed. "Could use me a drink rightabout now."

"Yeah, I think I'd prefer that over water..." Alfred sighed and shook his head. "Buuuut I gotta think of Toni... man, would it be wrong? And also now that Gil kinda did *that*-"

"Nah I reckon you'd be right. I mean, who's gonna blame you? No one was gonna say anything 'bout Gil," Steve reasoned. "'cept maybe his-"

"HEY! HEY!" Mathias suddenly flung himself at the railing and waved enthusiastically as Berwald walked over. The man had his eyes averted in what could only be embarrassment and that was fair enough. Meanwhile, Tino lit up and stood by the railing. Lukas remained sitting, with the same, almost bored expression.

"Hey! You never told me you became a cop!" Mathias leaned forward as Berwald stood on the other side. "What's it like? Is it just like the movies? Do you get to have a gun? Come on sweet Swede, it's only fair you tell me all about it after you lied to me for so long."

"I didn't lie," Berwald stated.

"Yeah, he technically didn't since he didn't say anything," Tino grinned, a little smugly.

"Well, you guys definitely lied! To my face, too!"

"We didn't," Lukas defended.

"Still! How could you keep something as cool as this from me?" Mathias gestured to Berwald while the others gave him looks. Matthew picked up that clearly, they didn't want him making a big deal of it. Mathias waved his hands like it didn't matter as he swung on the railing. "Was it hard to become a cop? Do you think I'd be a good cop?"

Berwald didn't answer, his eyes raking over everyone in front of him like he was looking for something or someone.

"Only if they're looking for a diversity hire," Lukas said as he sat up to reach Mathias and pinch him for acting so energetically.

"What?" He squawked. "Because I'm Danish?"

"No," Lukas pulled him by the shirt, making him sit. "Because you're-"

"Because you're very gifted, Mathias." Tino smiled as if he didn't use a baby voice on a grown man.

"You guys don't believe in me," Mathias grumbled and Lukas pointedly said nothing. Berwald didn't react at all.

"So are you here to say hi?" Tino rested his arms on the railing as he leaned a little bit closer. "How much longer do you have to work?"

"A while," Berwald answered, before turning to Alfred and nodding. "I'm here for him."

"Um," Alfred tensed as he processed what was happening. "Why?"

Matthew tensed too as his mind quickly raced to think about *what* the police could possibly want from Alfred. Did they figure something out? Was Alfred being detained? Did the Chief send Berwald because he knew they were acquainted and so his brother was less likely to resist?

"We have questions."

Matthew couldn't think what those questions could possibly be.

"About *what* dude?" Alfred's voice was getting finicky. "Am I under arrest?!"

"No." Berwald unlatched part of the railing and pulled it open, obviously expecting Alfred to come. Matthew's hand twisted in his pants. On one hand, Alfred should definitely not go with the police... but on the other hand, if he came back and Matthew got him to talk, he might finally have some insight that he desperately wanted.

"If I'm not under arrest, then I don't have to go."

"Of course you do!" Mathias said. "Cus then you can come back and tell us what it's about!"

"It's confidential," Berwald added, his tone a little sterner. Matthew knew that had never stopped his brother before.

"How's that meant to make me feel better?" Alfred grunted, set in his choice.

"It's about some victims," Berwald relented after a moment. "You knew them."

Alfred gave Berwald an appraising look, considering whether there was any risk going with him or if this was all a trap.

"I think you should go, Al," Matthew forced himself to speak up. It was hard to force the words out when he was so used to just watching, and now it felt like he was mimicking the inherent abilities to be that everyone else just had. But he had to find out what the police were thinking of that required more questions from Alfred specifically... "You might be able to help and I'm sure they just want you to talk about someone you knew, eh?"

Alfred dragged out a groan before pushing himself up by his knees. He walked through the gate and crossed his arms as Berwald latched it back in place.

"Fine, but I want to see Gil and Toni and that after."

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The others speculated on Alfred's sudden summons for about two minutes before Tino forcibly changed the topic by repeating the same insistence that boiled down to 'oh well.'

The change in conversation was cemented when banter picked up again and Mathias, *ironically* given the smirk accompanying the comment, called Lukas his 'Norwegian kitten.' Lukas immediately tensed up and snarled before storming over to what was Alfred's seat and making himself comfortable there. He glared at Steve when his unashamed chuckling encouraged Mathias.

Then Zach appeared and sat where Lukas had been prior, which Matthew assumed was something he'd regret. He wouldn't want to sit next to Mathias, who evidently got off annoying people.

But those thoughts didn't linger, not when he had things to keep an eye on. Berwald had taken Alfred away, leading him down an alleyway behind the monument. Matthew needed to think about how he could pry but knew he couldn't do that until they were alone at home... Which might be the last thing on Alfred's mind considering his obsession with finding Gilbert, Antonio and Feliciano.

Speaking of them, they were all lingering around on the other side of the railing and from their forlorn glances, it wasn't willful. Matthew figured they must've been instructed to, but he couldn't think of what the Chief would still want with them.

Well, strong words with Gilbert would be expected, so the others must be sticking around to protect him from that.

Basch was still sitting where he was before, unmoving. Even when all the people around him were starting to leave and vacate, he remained. When Matthew glanced back, Lili and Erzsébet were still where they were. From the way they occasionally glanced at Basch, it seemed they were waiting for him. Logically, they would have to be waiting for him to *do* something, because if they were just waiting on him to leave, why not go up to him and ask him to leave?

Surely that meant Basch couldn't be the Copycat. Matthew could only picture some loner and while *technically* Basch fit... he just felt that wasn't the case. If anything, he was reminded of Alfred and his 'heroism', making him think that Basch had purposely separated himself from the others because he deemed them needing protection...

From whatever he intended to do.

Matthew didn't know how long he would have to wait for Alfred to come back and despite how nervous he was just thinking about what his brother could be interrogated for and *why now*, he had an opportunity in the meantime.

He could eavesdrop on Alfred's friends as he analysed the other attendees. There were lots of people who hadn't left right away and Matthew inspected the expressions of every face, hoping to find a tell. It was hard to know what he was looking for, but he was sure he'd know it once he saw it.

The railing rattled and he flinched when Alasdair jumped it with Iryna and Ivan behind him, crowding Matthew as they landed right next to him.

"Struth, that looked like fun," Steve said in welcome.

"Not my idea of fun," Alasdair scoffed.

"I'm pretty sure it unlatches somehow," Tino commented sheepishly. "I can-"

"No need." Ivan picked his unsuspecting sister up before depositing her on the other side and jumping over himself.

"Hey, where's everyone else?" Mathias glanced past them.

After clarifying that they were allowed to leave but Gilbert *was not*, hence why his friends were sticking with him, Alasdair struck up a conversation with Tino about Peter, while Iryna thanked everyone else for coming.

That was when Kiku and Yao showed up, asking for Alfred. They only got their answer *after* Steve loudly proclaimed what a surprise it was that Yao got time off work.

"Come on mate, can you blame me?" Steve continued. "You're a bloody workaholic! You gotta learn to work to live and not the other way 'round!"

Ivan began creeping closer to Yao, almost *sliding* with silent efficiency as he wrapped an arm around him. Despite the obvious lack of understanding of basic boundaries, Yao didn't push him off.

"Yes, you are workaholic," Ivan added while Yao scowled. "You have no time for poor friends."

"I'll have you know I worked my way to top of my field and it's not just something that can be done easily!" Yao began to lecture, pointing at Steve and Ivan. "I have to constantly prove myself and being passionate about my work comes at the cost of turning it into lifestyle."

"Yeah nah, I'm aware. You think my lifestyle is disappoinin' ma Mum." Steve had a smug look on his face. "But it's actually just riling you up because you're so cute to mess with, y'know that?"

Yao fell for the rage bait, hook, line, and sinker. Yet despite their banter, it was only ever that. No wonder Steve was Alfred's favourite cousin.

Still, Matthew couldn't help but be on edge whenever he was around Yao. While the guy wasn't as passive as Kiku, he could be just as polite. Though often he wasn't. He was super opinionated and would openly criticise anyone, thinking his age and status made him right. Being noticed by Yao often came with condescending teasing as he called him a 'soft white boy', making Matthew feel like he was just below him.

It was amusing to see Steve agitate him, but it still made Matthew wary because while he was 'Matthew', he never had the guts to poke at a bear.

"Well, since you're free, how about you come with me and Zee?" Steve continued once he explained his plan to a much more receptive Yao.

"Fine," Yao crossed his arms like he caved. "But no drinking. I have work early tomorrow."

Steve let out an anguished sigh, though it was all in jest. "Yeah whatever, let's do this. You gotta come too Kiku, it's been too long since I've seen you boys. I swear youse are always too busy."

Kiku glanced at the ground and only Matthew knew what it meant. No one else knew about what Kiku had put on his shoulders in an attempt to avenge his friend.

"I will come too," Ivan said, even though he had already gone that morning and would be in dire need of rest.

With so many people around him, Matthew pressed his back against the railing to give them room. At least like this, he could glance back at the audience and the motion would look natural. Officers and civilians were starting to stack up the overwhelming amount of chairs. Could the Copycat be one of them?

The railing rattled underneath his hands, sending vibrations along his back. Matthew glanced around and immediately noticed that Basch wasn't there anymore. He twisted to see him storming with purpose right towards the alley that Berwald and Alfred had disappeared down.

Matthew swallowed thickly. Now it seemed like a good thing that his brother was taken because hopefully, he could find out what was going on. Matthew had a feeling he really ought to know.

Steve whistled sharply as he saw Basch move, standing with a slap on his legs.

"Ight, I guess he really wanted his piss. Who's coming with?"

Despite Kiku's restrained protests and Yao's more blatant ones with insults of Steve's intelligence, they still got roped into following along with Zach. Ivan and Mathias joined in too, though more voluntarily than the others. Lukas grunted and followed Mathias while reminding him that they're not here to interview the police, saying he can ask Berwald all the intrusive questions he wanted once they got home. Alasdair stole Steve's seat and told him to get something good to drown his sorrows in.

Suddenly, Matthew found himself put on the spot as he was torn from the pressure of making a split-second decision. He could stay here and eavesdrop on Tino and Alasdair talking about Peter and potentially even jump in the conversation! Or he could join the others despite not being included and roleplay being included...

He jumped the railing and followed the group towards the supermarket. Matthew hadn't spotted the Copycat yet and he was starting to realise that his best opportunity to catch him was on the streets. At least then he'd be in his element. Besides, he had valuable information that he could pry from members of this group, starting with asking about Berwald. At least by being on this side of the railing, Matthew would catch a glimpse of that statue up close. He knew he wouldn't have an opportunity to get close to it again, not with how ruthless Chief Beilschmidt was and how once the sun fell, the game would be back on.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by me --> https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/815569302375809024/the-explosive-night-that-he-became?source=share

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

I'm updating this at 2 in the morning so ignore formatting mistakes. I won't be back to fix them

Also I hope everyone knows that the 'Norwegian kitten' comment from last chapter was a nod towards The Danish Slaughterhouse. I could not take that fic seriously because that was used unironically and none of the characters treated it as silly ahaha

Also, enjoy some cameos! I can only fit so many characters in so hopefully when I get around to making an Alfred pov fic, he'll get to interact with so many other people and we'll see some extra people then

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Oxenstierna escorted Jones out, Alaric sighed into his hands. He sat on a pallet in the dim storeroom, though the low light was hardly a relief and his veins throbbed beneath his fingers. Alaric was left feeling like that conversation had been painfully underwhelming and that nothing had come from it.

The first thing Alfred asked for was water, which was a more than reasonable request. The police had a pack of bottles on standby and after drinking two-thirds of it in one go, Alfred was ready to talk.

Alaric needed a lot of information but as he was juggling so many things as it was, all he really needed to know was whether or not Alfred could name any individuals who may have had a grudge against him. If Jones could name anyone who showed up on the lists his team made, then they would be a priority to investigate first.

But Alfred couldn't think of anyone. He had managed to suggest his *friend* 'Ivan' and Alaric jotted the name, but Alfred was unconvinced and so was he. Especially when he started backtracking on Ivan and insisting he was just 'misunderstood' and would never hurt a fly. Then he went on a tangent claiming 'since Ivan's a little bit deaf, he just stares at people and it freaks them out... he's not really a bad guy or someone who holds grudges...'

Then Alfred disregarded all formality by striking up a conversation with Oxenstierna. Alfred had been surprised that Oxenstierna had a career change and was more or less pestering him with questions and barely hidden intrigue. Alaric was about to redirect the conversation when he was overcome by the notion that he should let this play out.

This behaviour was expected of the Copycat... though Alaric didn't know what to make of the fact that Alfred had been the first on the scene for two of The Trail Killer's early victims.

Yet. Clearly now was not the time to conduct an interview. Nor the place. Alaric would have to compile a list of everyone in Alfred's life at a later date, though knowing Oxenstierna was

acquainted with Jones he could advise in the meantime.

Saying that Oxenstierna entertained the conversation would be a generous definition, but the man replied to each inquiry all the same. Alaric only put a stop to it and told Alfred he was dismissed when he started asking about Gilbert. He advised Alfred they would be in contact later and there would be a follow-up conversation before waving him away. Alaric wasn't going to entertain discussing his grandson with him, especially given his behaviour during the event.

Though he was aware that Alfred and Gilbert would cross paths as he was escorted out, Alaric decided he didn't care if it caused his grandson to lash out again from seeing Oxenstierna or his friend. Alaric wasn't here to justify decisions to him or let the feelings of one unstable individual dictate his actions.

At least by being alone here now, Alaric had a brief moment to take a breath and organise his thoughts. Given the onslaught of responsibilities waiting for him out there, this was a luxury he greedily wanted to take.

Still, he was grateful to have competent staff. While Oxenstierna was no qualified profiler, Alaric thought he had potential. He had become sold on the man when he personally interviewed every applicant that stood out to him and one thing Alaric noticed right off the bat was that Oxenstierna struggled to speak. Not because he was intimidated or unintelligent, but because it seemed unnatural and unpreferred. That tipped Alaric off that Oxenstierna was not only a natural listener but someone who observed and thought deeply. Someone who should be assisting the investigation.

And if Alaric was honest, Oxenstierna's story of his adopted son was moving enough that it sparked something. Something more than just seeing the connection between Peter and Arthur Kirkland, first killed by the Trail Killer. Something intrinsic that reminded him of when he first took in his grandsons...

Something that prevented him from acting on the idea of having Peter speak for his brother today. Alaric had decided it was better not to suggest. When he had taken in his grandsons, he remembered the feeling of devotion that defined him and the determination to make a life for them, one better than his own. Peter was only a boy, and Alaric had entered this line of work with the intention to protect children from the ruthlessness of the world.

Now he had to focus ahead, all while trying his best not to crumble under the pressure as with each day that passed, the case only got bigger and bigger. The whole world was watching.

Today's event was a double-edged sword. It would help the investigation, but also put the police in the spotlight. With the Chief reading off so many names of those he had failed, people would inevitably question why the number was so great and if the police were making headway with the case. Alaric knew the media liaison would have their work cut out for them, but it was still not preferable to admit that at this stage, an arrest was not on the horizon.

Alaric checked his phone to see countless notifications, all blending into each other as his eyes struggled to focus on the blurred words, prompting to take the eye drops again. Once he blinked his vision clear, he skimmed over them and saw that the IT department had a new report for him to look over, as expected. The new head of that department was actually enlisted through the same initiative that brought Oxenstierna on board and, despite his age, he seemed promising given his extensive resume. Von Bock had already done effective work in quarantining most online

discussions about the Trail Killer and all Alaric had to do was weigh up if there was any point in making them live again.

It seemed there was, considering there were two options: the devil he knew, and the devil he didn't.

Even once everything online was restricted, he couldn't compete with hashtags like 'Tra!l K!ller' and the likes always popping up. Good thing they had a big online department that combed through posts to remove ones that glorified what was happening. Others were left to sell the narrative he had in mind and manage public perception. Not that he could do that for too long.

Speaking of which, he still had to speak to his liaison journalist. Through his initiative to bring more people to the police force, Alaric had taken many new hires with big potential on board. One of the biggest journalists and bloggers/vloggers was one of them and even if Łukasiewicz seemed to be primarily motivated by drama, he was a good asset to have. Better than Augustus, that was for sure.

Alaric had only just decided it was time for him to get moving when Oxenstierna came back in with someone he recognised.

"He wants to speak with you," Oxenstierna explained, and Alaric looked at the determined young man accompanying him.

If he recalled correctly, Basch was a cousin to his grandsons, sans Roderich, who was formerly his childhood best friend. Alaric wondered if that was what Basch wanted to discuss now.

"Make it brief," Alaric said sternly, rolling his shoulders as he stood. While he didn't have time for this, Basch was family and the Chief knew his nature. There had to be a reason he didn't call, and that intrigue was making him pause.

"I want to help catch the Trail Killer," Basch stated. The full force of his intense tenacity was barely restrained as he pulled out a stack of files from his bag. "This is everything you should know. It's my resume and all my qualifications and proof of my capabilities."

He held out the papers, eye contact unwavering. "Hire me."

Alaric was right to be intrigued. He took the papers and skimmed over them, though it was more a formality than anything. He was aware of Basch's history and exploits, and now he was just further impressed by his straightforward guts and level of preparation.

There were documents detailing his military training as a Swiss national, documents proving his membership at notable rifle clubs and cards including his impressive shooting score. He had competed in tournaments too and walked away with medals, had certificates as evidence for qualifications from first aid to emergency response and proficiency in hand-to-hand combat.

"Why do you want to work with us?" Alaric asked as he continued to read.

"This has gone on far enough. I'll do anything I can to bring the Trail Killer to justice and make this city safe again..." With a forlorn glance at the door, Basch turned to Oxenstierna with a similar expression of understanding, an unspoken agreement that they want to protect someone. "I can do something to stop this, before someone else has to die. Someone has to do something and I am someone. Clearly, you need as much help as you can get."

Alaric couldn't say no. He just needed to figure out how the pieces would fall in place. Leaving things to fate was never an option. Basch had a look about him that tipped Alaric off that he wouldn't be leaving without achieving what he set out to do, and if he didn't work with the police, he would go rogue.

"I commend you for your preparation," Alaric said, handing the papers to Oxenstierna to be filed away later. "Considering your extensive capabilities, I agree you would assist this investigation."

"Thank you." Some of the tension bled out of Basch's shoulders but the eyes stayed hard. "I don't care what I have to do, just give me a chance to do something. I don't care if it's dangerous, I'm prepared to do anything."

"I'm sure you have some idea in mind..." Alaric mused, flicking his hair to rest on his back as he thought.

"I say this as a statement and not to brag, but I can shoot a target the size of a tennis ball from a mile away."

"I agree you would be most suited for a sniper position," Alaric nodded. He had enough manpower in the form of regular officers, but having someone specialised was harder to come by.

This was all unfolding for his benefit. One of his last cards to play would be an initiative geared to the public that encouraged anyone to become a police officer... something that would surely be too successful and cause mass applicants due to the popularity of this case. The Trail Killer was famous worldwide... and the Battle Axe Butcher would certainly apply. Though screening for him at this stage would be almost impossible to juggle with everything else going on. A shame when it was a viable option. Though with time and preparation, the small investigation team would only have to match names to a few refined lists as opposed to interviewing *thousands* upon thousands of applicants.

Alternatively, all of that could be avoided if Basch was utilised efficiently.

"You would be best positioned as a sniper over a location of interest," Alaric thought out loud. "As long as you have an unobscured view of that location, and the location is of importance enough to a killer, he would inevitably revisit. Even if he lacks the courage to get close at first, confidence will come to him after he gets away with murder."

Ideally, there would be no more murders. If Alaric ventured a guess, he would assume that a lot of the notifications on his phone were to address the unrest in his field force. He sighed. He couldn't bear to see good men and women lose their lives like this... the pursuit of justice should never come at such a price... something would have to be done.

One problem at a time, and he knew the Battle Axe Butcher was the most pressing. But with Basch now in the equation...

"Oxenstierna, take note of this. We'll need to discreetly find a suitable location to post Basch, one that has Roderich's memorial in clear view. We'll also need to find appropriate tranquilisers that are appropriate for the estimated size of our target and are compatible with whatever gun of his choosing. When curfew begins, he'll wait there until either it ends, or we make an apprehension."

While Basch nodded along, Alaric knew Oxenstierna would understand the importance of choosing that location. The fact was that sooner or later, their active killer would be feeling sentimental and it

was far more probable that the Battle Axe Butcher would want some privacy in that location than this memorial site. Given the killer's forensic countermeasures so far, Alaric knew he couldn't rely on the cameras to identify their subject, even if they could catch helpful information. He couldn't rely on the patrol units either, considering the killer had been expertly avoiding them so far...

If the Battle Axe Butcher didn't revisit within a week, Alaric would be really surprised but if he worked with either the media or Łukasiewicz to get Roderich's name and face circulating again, it would be inevitable...

Alaric turned to Basch, who only knew what the public was aware of and nothing more.

"Of course, we'll need to have you sign some paperwork as there is some information about the case that must be kept from the public at all costs, however I'm sure that's no problem." Once Basch nodded, Alaric continued. "Once briefed, you'll have full permission to shoot anyone who enters the zone, as this is certainly a shoot first and ask questions later scenario. Probability cause will cover us legally and once you confirm the subject is down, we'll have a team move in."

With the use of tranquillisers, any downed subject would not have to be maimed or murdered to be taken into custody. Alaric needed the Battle Axe Butcher *alive* and now that he had found a way to make it possible, he was sold. He was well acquainted with the works of Sun Tzu, *'To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.'*

Though he knew that realistically, it could be a while before it was a success. Who knew when the Battle Axe Butcher would be feeling sentimental, and if he was found before he decided to double back during curfew. Oxenstierna gave him a nod that said that he would organise what Alaric asked him to and that made him breathe a little easier.

"I understand," Basch said curtly, and Alaric could see Ludwig in him. "In that paperwork are logs about all of my guns and their licences. I only have one rifle and while I would prefer to use that because that's what I'm used to, if there's any make of gun that I have to use because of police policy, I will use it. Just tell me and I will train until I use it better than my own."

"I said any rifle of your choosing," Alaric repeated. "Not only is there no time, but we cannot have any variables when the time comes to make a shot."

Basch just nodded. Nothing more needed to be said. Not from him... and not from Alaric. Even if Alaric knew there were things to say and things to ask... things that he could read from the way Basch acted and what was driving him to do this.

But Alaric already knew, and who was he to lecture someone on how to deal with their grief? He had a job to do and for the sake of keeping his goal in his sights, there was simply no point.

"How soon can you start?"

"Immediately," Basch's eyes narrowed.

"Good, I want you prepared to start tonight. Are you prepared to come to the precinct with us now?

Basch nodded, face completely serious.

"Good. Please follow me," Alaric gestured for Oxenstierna to follow too as he stepped outside. He didn't need to explain to Basch that the enemy was lurking somewhere out here, and would've seen him be chauffeured in to speak with the Chief. If anything, that could work for his benefit. The cameras would still be rolling and anyone taking particular note of Basch would be noted.

The air was fresh when he stepped out and Alaric swept a long look over who was still present. An overwhelming amount of people were still lingering but Alaric knew he had other things to focus on than reading the crowd. However, his gaze still landed on the front row past the platform stage, where Alfred was with the group he had been sitting with earler. If anything, it seemed to have grown as some of the civilian speakers had now joined him. Clearly he was an extremely well-connected individual.

But that wasn't the face that he landed on. As he, Oxenstierna and Basch came into view, they all turned to observe with varying degrees of interest. One of them gave him a flirtatious wave that seemed to be directed towards Oxenstierna.

"Who's that?" Alaric knew his conversational question served no real purpose, but he felt compelled to ask.

"My wife."

Alaric blinked as he looked at who was waving, then tilted towards Oxenstierna slightly.

"...that man?"

Oxenstierna nodded. He was looking at the man with his usual unsmiling expression, but Alaric didn't miss the fondness in his eyes.

"Domestic partner," Oxenstierna clarified. "Inside joke ...My English was poor."

"I see," Alaric acknowledged, before his eyes fell on *another* individual who was also waving, although mock flirtatiously. He instantly recognised him as the one who had reacted when Oxenstierna had come into view earlier. "And that one?"

"Cousin." Oxenstierna grunted his reply, tipping Alaric off that this cousin was someone Oxenstierna struggled with. "He didn't know."

Despite the vague statement, Alaric knew this cousin wasn't aware that Oxenstierna had changed careers.

"I see... what's his name?"

Despite knowing that his role today had been to perform, that it wasn't up to him to watch the audience and trust those who did, Alaric was curious to know if this cousin popped up on any of their radars. If it was just for that moment alone, then maybe it was simply a case of thoroughness. He was being cautious, but at least if this cousin did make it to a list, being in Oxenstierna's immediate circle would make for an easy investigation and a quick vetting process.

"I know him," Oxenstierna said, looking reluctant to say more. Another thing Alaric appreciated about Oxenstierna was that he kept up without having everything spelt out to him. He knew what the Chief was thinking, for better or worse. "I know he might fit the profile, but I can't picture him doing it."

"I understand," Alaric had long learnt when to pick his battles, despite what he put into practice. There was no point in reminding Oxenstierna that the profile said those closest to the killer wouldn't believe it, but it would only be cruel to put those thoughts into his head without cause. If this cousin was worth looking into, that would be made apparent soon enough once the footage had been analysed thoroughly.

"I will keep an eye on him," Berward said quietly with a sigh, to which Alaric simply nodded.

With that conversation over, he glanced at where Gilbert was being monitored and resigned himself to dealing with that.

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His grandson was surrounded by his friends, and it was beyond Alaric to even assume why they were still standing by him despite the hardships he brought. Regardless, Alaric liked to think it said more about the qualities of their character than his grandson's.

Gilbert was currently sitting against the wall of the other building, obscured by his friends and officers standing around him. Beside him was an empty plastic water bottle, one *verified* to contain water, and Alaric was relieved to see the lack of evidence that Gilbert had just tipped it out beside him. A lack of bile was a promising sign too, though Alaric thought it would serve him right if there was. In his hand was Ludwig's police hat, which Gilbert had pitched a fit to have and now held it tightly to his chest with no intent to let it go.

Alaric turned away from his grandson sprawled out on the ground and with a nod, dismissed the officers babysitting him.

"Thank you for your efforts today," Alaric addressed the group, their faces turning towards him with either apathy, annoyance, or oblivious friendliness. "I understand that I have been asking a lot of you and I want you to know I appreciate your cooperation."

Alaric wasn't going to hold anything against them. He was more than willing to overlook all the strain the volunteers put him under because he really didn't want their worst moments to define them. He wouldn't want that for himself, given every time he caught a glimpse of his reflection, he detested what looked back.

Augustus was right about grief. The pitying look from said man irked him, because he was no older and yet liked to act like he was so wise because of his age. The status of his prime had surely gone to his head, though Alaric knew he couldn't discredit that entirely, as it had been earned.

"It's okay, I'm happy I could help," Feliciano piped up, and his grandfather rubbed his shoulder as he hugged him close.

"Yeah, between me or Lucille speaking, I would rather that she doesn't have to do something so... hard," Antonio rubbed his hands over his forearms. Beside him was someone who looked strikingly like him, and the only logical conclusion was he had a twin. Alaric spared a glance towards Augustus and Feliciano while Antonio continued to speak with a mournful drawl and his brother rubbed his arm. "Especially when she's not even an adult..."

Alaric remembered seeing her seated with the non-speaking friends and family of the deceased. She wasn't present now, and he couldn't say he faulted her.

Maybe Gilbert felt that this was nothing more than an obligation, or that this was a punishment and not them just trying to make the best out of what they had.

His eye twitched when a plastic bottle was pelted at his shoulder.

"Does this mean you won't make us do some shit like this at Roderich's funeral?" Gilbert grumbled, his hair sticking to his forehead due to sweat as he slumped against the wall.

"It's okay if we have to!" Feliciano quickly said. "I want to say something nice about Roderich too!"

"I have no intention of turning what should be a private affair into a performance," Alaric reassured, though he slipped a hard look at Gilbert, who frustratingly sneered back.

"You did when it was Ludwig's funeral!"

"He was a police officer," Alaric said slowly, "and his death was turned into a spectacle-"

"Yeah, by *you*."

Alaric sighed sharply and turned to face the others. He was *not* going to be entertaining this. He was entertaining the idea of telling Gilbert that he *did fine, even if he didn't stick to what they discussed*, but now it would only prompt a reaction.

"I want nothing more than to only have those who cared for him at his funeral," he stated earnestly. "Should things pan out how I want them to, the event will be close friends and family only. Of course-"

"*Mein Gott*, why do you have to talk like that?" Gilbert whined. Alaric ignored him.

"I can't make promises for when it'll be, beyond as soon as possible. I had to fight to make this event possible because the amount of paperwork involved was tedious, so I hope you'll be understanding."

"Of course we will," Augustus stepped forward to pat Alaric's shoulder with a heavy hand. "If you need any help planning it, I'll be happy to help."

Alaric resisted the urge to roll his shoulder and let Augustus' pity slide off him, but he couldn't forget what had happened earlier and wanted nothing more than for that to be put behind them. Though there was something he could ask of the man.

He cast a look down at Gilbert and his stomach lurched in disappointment. Alaric had ultimately decided not to have his grandson publicly removed from the event before it started. If only because he considered how humiliating it would be for the boy, and how it would only cause more turbulence between them. Then, when it came for everyone to give their eulogies, Alaric couldn't believe that compassion was the wrong choice to make.

Twice.

He could've had Gilbert removed *before* his speech, *during* his speech, even *after*. And yet he *didn't*. Even when his blood boiled from hearing his grandson's disguised provocation of the killer and outright challenge for the monster to kill his Grandfather.

Alaric was furiously affronted. He knew that Gilbert's comment would plant the idea and inspire the Battle Axe Butcher, something that Alaric had stewed on... Until the end of the service and he had time to consider it while getting nothing worthwhile from Alfred...

Luckily he had a break with Basch, but if that didn't provide results soon enough... perhaps Gilbert's words were something to consider. If using himself as bait put an end to this, then Alaric was certainly tempted. Still, it was only something he would consider once his primary problem had been taken care of.

"If you don't mind, I have a request of you," Alaric phrased it as an option, knowing that coming across demanding now would just vindicate his grandson in their eyes.

"Alright, what is it?" Augustus perked up, though the Chief didn't miss the way his eyes held restraint.

"Take him home," Alaric motioned to his grandson. "I'll overlook his behaviour today if you take responsibility for him and keep him on house arrest."

Gilbert just scoffed and made an offensive motion with his hand as he brought his knees to his chest.

"Do you understand that public intoxication is a criminal offence?" Alaric spoke with such force that he saw spit fly, forcing himself to take a breath and compose himself. Maybe he should've phrased his request to Augustus as *worry* for his grandson, but considering everything he thought it was a given. He only had one grandchild left and of course it had to be the most thoughtless and careless of them all.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't know that he had gotten his hands on-" Antonio started rambling, genuinely panicked at the prospect that he had 'allowed' this to happen, but Alaric cut him off.

"I do not hold you personally responsible," he stated, turning to Augustus, who was looking at Gilbert empathetically. "I only ask this of you because you're an adult and I trust you to be able to look after him."

It was a barely concealed appeal to compassion because even if Alaric was at odds with Augustus right now, he couldn't pass Gilbert off onto anyone else. There were his friends but Alaric didn't like the idea. There was no alternative and he didn't want his grandson to be unsupervised.

"Don't worry," Augustus sighed and nodded with resolution. "I'll make sure he gets home and is fed. I'm sure he just needs someone to watch out for him right now and make him feel like everything's going to be alright."

"It fucking won't be," Gilbert grumbled, but still let Augustus pick him off the floor and help him stand. Gilbert's eyes flicked to Oxenstierna with a torn but apologetic look before briefly meeting his Grandfathers. Alaric could see the shame inside that he didn't want to acknowledge.

As that group left, Antonio and Feliciano only spared the Chief one forlorn look of sympathy before fussing over Gilbert. Augustus never looked back.

Alaric didn't linger on it. He didn't. Couldn't.

Chapter End Notes

Also, Gens_0uu (chi_nanananami_aki) (Ao3) / gens_0uu (tiktok) made something inspired by this fic! > https://www.tiktok.com/@gens_0uu/video/7638820760844258590

(yes I forgot the number again smh in my defense it was 2am)

Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a long day, and Matthew counted himself lucky that he had been able to convince Alfred to come home with the prospect of burgers. He didn't even need to spin it as 'home-made' or 'healthy' to really sell it, all his brother had to be told was 'burgers'. At least he was consistent.

Though logically, it was more likely that Alfred wanted to continue hanging out with his friends. *But,* he knew that having to split when night fell would be too hard to do when there were so many prying eyes around, so the excuse of having dinner worked in his favour.

Regardless, the end result was the same. The two of them were alone and Matthew could pester Alfred without having to fight for his attention and bitterly lose. And as they sat on the couch to eat burgers and watch the news, Matthew was in luck because his brother was *more* than happy to rant about the Chief.

Not that all of it was very useful. Alfred kept going off topic and bringing up how the Chief had acted during Ludwig's funeral and he was sure something had gone down today. *Especially* since Gilbert got glared at after his speech and after being reminded of his friend, Alfred went on a ramble about how Gilbert is 'icing him out completely'.

Then he swung the pendulum to the other side and started going on and on about poor Gilbert. Alfred ranted about how the guy had lost all his family and the Chief should count himself 'lucky' because Gilbert still cared about him at all. Matthew didn't know how his brother didn't see that Gilbert's plea to the killer was him being a dick, not him genuinely upset. But he just pushed Alfred back on track and eventually got an answer.

"He just kept asking me if I could think of anyone who hated me or whatever," Alfred said with a mouthful of burger, with pieces flying from his mouth. "I dunno. Also I still can't believe that Berwald is a cop now! Well I guess I do believe it..."

Matthew almost dropped his burger into his lap as he started thinking about what that could even mean. If anyone hated Alfred...? He knew it wasn't a good thing if the Chief of police was asking for Alfred personally, but part of him had assumed it would be related to Gilbert.

But the Chief had to be asking that for a reason and it bothered him that he couldn't think of *why*. What did Chief Beilschmidt know? Or *think* he knows?

Then he remembered how Alfred got invested in all of this... he was one of the first to *do* something about it and take it upon himself to roam the streets. But that couldn't be why the Chief was asking otherwise, he would've arrested Alfred for breaking curfew...

Wait, was it because Matthew had enjoyed those first few murders that started his career? Could the police really tell? It didn't seem like it from Ludwig's earliest draft... but if the police figured out that he had killed them because he enjoyed it... it would certainly be suspicious that every single one of them was acquainted with Alfred, one way or another...

Did the police think that someone was doing this to get revenge on his brother? Matthew's chest was tight as he considered that *had* to be it and suddenly he felt way too exposed. It was the only assumption he could make sense of, but he still wasn't sold on it. He knew he shouldn't let his thoughts linger but he couldn't help the worry that something unpredictable was coming his way.

"They didn't tell you why they are asking or tell you anything?" It felt like he was just fueling his desperation.

"No dude, he just asked and told me to think of literally anyone who would want to spite me. I dunno why."

There was no way it could be traced back to him. Sure, Arthur is Alfred's cousin, but the rest? Alfred knew a *lot* of people, but that didn't mean they were *all* his friends! Surely the Chief wouldn't see all of their deaths as just a way to spite Alfred *specifically*...

"So that was the only thing he asked?" Matthew's voice was wavering as he fought to speak at all.

"He did ask about uh.. Lovi and Nat... well, he asked about Feli and Ivan and when I said that maybe Ivan hates me- which he definitely doesn't, I took that back cus if he looks into Ivan then he's gonna find out that we're tryin' to help them hunt this guy down..." Alfred continued to rant as he scoffed the rest of his burger and wiped his fingers on his pants while eyeing Matthew's. "You're not gonna eat that?"

Matthew handed it to him with a mental *whatever* to justify the reflex. He was feeding his brother just to get answers out of him.

Maybe... the Chief thought Alfred was the Copycat. Clearly, he wasn't the Trail Killer- unless that wasn't clear at all. What would Matthew know when he hadn't been keeping close tabs on the investigation? Alfred was the first one to find Lovino and Natalya's bodies, so maybe the Chief thought that was suspicious. While that was good news for Matthew since he wasn't suspected... it was bad news because if they looked more into Alfred, they would find things they don't like.

Hopefully, the Chief had found what he was looking for or realised that there was nothing to find with Alfred.

"So once he was done... he let you go?" Matthew knew the answer, but still felt the need to establish the scene. "Did you see Basch there?"

Did you hear why he was there? That's what Matthew *really* needed to know.

"Uhh, not while I was there," Alfred spoke while chewing, muffling his words. "I saw him after, so did everyone. Still can't believe y'all went shopping without me and got me nothing. Anways, why was he there?"

Matthew weighed up if there was even any point in sharing what he saw when Alfred had nothing to add.

"He jumped the railing and started talking to one of the officers... then Barwald came and took him to where you went so I assume-"

"He probably just wanted to ask about Roderich," Alfred said. "Y'know, if there's going to be a funeral or not cus who knows what Gilbert's asshole grandpa will do."

That was not it. Sure, that was plausible, but it didn't seem right. It did not explain everything he saw and the energy radiating off Basch. When he was next seen standing by the Chief and Berwald with a look of resolve on his face, Matthew knew Basch had gotten what he wanted. So he wanted to work with the police after all...

As much as Matthew wanted to know more, he knew he should just stick with that so he wouldn't create a paper trail leading back to him. He did have the thought of convincing Alfred he needed to know so he would text Basch himself. It would be easy... if he just told his brother that he now had a friend who was an insider with the police, then it would be just like when Ludwig was alive. Or if Basch was going to be on the streets at night, Alfred needed to find out so he could be prepared.

Matthew would then have the opportunity to look at the messages once Alfred left for the night... but it was too risky with no promise of reward. He couldn't picture Basch responding warmly to questions. It would be completely pointless.

It seemed he wasn't going to get any other speculation from Alfred, though, which was fine because it reminded Matthew of something he was looking forward to. Having enjoyed this memorial event so much, he had been hoping Roderich's funeral would be announced soon and that he could find a way in. Being in adjacent social circles surely meant he had his foot in the door.

"So you don't know if there will be one or not?" Matthew didn't know why he was pushing, but his brother was way more connected than he was. So if any of his friends knew something (*besides* Gilbert, since he had apparently gone AWOL), then Alfred would know it too.

"There probably fuckin' would be one but I think it'll be family only and probably in German only so they can gatekeep and I don't even wanna fucking go anyways."

With that, Alfred stormed over to the fridge to grab an energy drink and shut himself in his room, the frame rattling from the force he used to slap the door. Matthew knew that Alfred was completely drained from earlier and dealing with the dread of what tonight would bring, but he still tensed at the outburst. Something suddenly overcame him and he held up his middle finger to Alfred's imposing door with a silent sneer.

After a moment, the satisfaction waned and he felt like a clown. He lowered his hand with a sigh and pushed his hair back. He had learnt a lot while following the group around at the grocery store and while the others conversed, he managed to disguise a few prying questions of his own. It was easy to, when Mathias was grilling Lukas about Berwald's new job and Lukas was just freely telling him.

Apparently Berwald was on the actual investigation team... Matthew didn't know if he'd be able to use that to his advantage. At the very least, it was useful knowledge to be aware of and consider. Berwald and Alfred weren't close... but they were close enough.

Alfred had been overly involved at the time while surrounded by friends, but his attitude changed drastically when everyone else went to see Roderich's street memorial.

Matthew checked the time. It was far too late to squeeze in a nap so he figured he'd be relying on caffeine and energy drinks tonight. Even if his stomach was restless at the prospect of what was ahead, he couldn't give anything else his attention. He slipped into his room and settled on his bed. There was a few hours before curfew and after an event as large as today, he had to know what was being shared around online. The first thing he saw was a slew of articles and news videos, all of which he consumed and digested.

Statue unveiled to mourn victims of senseless murder.

City hosted memorial in honour of murder victims

Nearly 10,000 people gathered to remember victims

Chief's statement about how losing two grandchildren motivates him to catch their killer

Trail Killer still considered to be at large

Curfew to be under review in a week's time, expected to remain in effect

Expect to see 30 day jail time if you break curfew

Statement from neighbour of Roderich Edelstein about shocking murder; 'neighbourhood feels stripped of safety'

Tipline for serial killer searching for volunteers

Matthew then opened up incognito mode to try and find something discussing the Trail Killer that wasn't professionally published. It turned out there was quite a lot being said, but it didn't feel like anything before the ban. Compared to then, everything was dull and filtered. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but it seemed there wasn't as much discussion as there was before, when he had caused that night to be remembered...

He kept searching and eventually landed on an emerging forum discussing why everything had been shut down to begin with. There were all sorts of rumours from 'it's rude and wrong to have it up', to the idea that people were assisting the Trail Killer somehow. The mods even suggested that everything else was taken down because it could've impeded the investigation or spread misinformation, and that this very forum could be taken down if it got too much traffic.

It was frustrated, but he was used to taking what he could get.

As he continued to browse through public opinion of his alter ego, he couldn't help but think about everything that had led up to being in this position. About how much had happened since that day of rage in the park that led to everything simultaneously falling out and into place. If he wasn't the Trail Killer, he'd have nothing. He'd still be 'Matthew' and living in the same cage he had been confined to. Just picturing it now, each year like the last, getting absolutely nowhere despite his efforts... fading more with each day until he wasn't even there anymore... rotting from the inside out until he eventually did himself in and took that knife to his own wrist because the internalised agony needed to escape.

He'd still be nothing and still be no one. But now, he was someone that no one would ever forget and someone respected by all, if you stretched the definition of respect to be slightly more inclusive. Why would he want to be anything other than that? How could he tolerate being nothing?

He had to keep going.

Even if sometimes he felt like he couldn't recognise himself and no one would ever recognise *him*, 'Matthew', as the Trail Killer because to everyone... he was just a sensitive weakling who was just a

passive NPC. Someone to overlook. He entertained the idea of everyone learning who he was but he couldn't picture the scenes with clarity. Obviously people would be shocked... but would they be scared? Would they think he was just joking?

Maybe one day he would find out. Until then, he was content with the plan he had in mind: Get rid of the Copycat and leave him in the park. Move through his list of hits. End with Gilbert and bring about his end. Set up an elaborate trail that ended with the graveyard...

See what happened then.

Soon it was time to get ready for the night and after consuming an adequate amount of caffine to keep him going through the night ahead, he lay in waiting.

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Eerily enough, being back on the streets brought him a sense of comfort. It had to be familiarity, likely because it was just the same as the prior nights and nothing had actually changed despite everything that unfolded today. But he knew that complacency wouldn't do him any good now, the minute he thought this would be easy was the minute his guard was down.

Especially when he had his sights set on the other killer, who he could just feel in his guts *had* to be out tonight. The air was beyond fresh as a light fog started to linger and obscure the horizon with a wispy haze. With one ear connected to the radio, the thought of today ending with a body signed by the Trail Killer for the police to find only spurred him forward.

Even if what was being said annoyed him. When he first heard it, he didn't take note. But the second time the police said 'Battle Axe Butcher', he wondered who they were talking about. As the officers began to talk about how they were being picked off by the 'Battle Axe Butcher', Matthew pieced it together when a mention of the 'Copycat' was ignored and replied to with '*Battle Axe Butcher*'.

Why did they change the name? When? And again, *why to that*? Did it mean that someone on the internet had clued on and realised there was another killer and promptly named him? Matthew did *not* like that thought. He needed to get to whoever this was before they gained notoriety.

Another thing that was made apparent was just how much the foot units were pulled back, something that all the police were apparently very relieved about as it shuffled into conversation every now and again. But even without a radio, Matthew noticed it. There were still some officers on foot and *alone*, albeit in well-lit, spacious areas, likely so they could see an assault before it came. That seemed like a good thing to know, which put him ahead in the rat race, given that not even the vigilantes or the other killer were aware of the ever changing dynamics of the police force.

The first hour passed with nothing of note. The second was the same. Yet Matthew stayed ever alert and prowled behind his brother, who almost seemed paranoid. Matthew wondered just what Alfred was thinking when he realised they were walking towards the memorial site that had just been unveiled today. Going to it would be suicide and was desperately thinking of what he could do to steer his brother off track when Alfred just paused in the shadows and suddenly backtracked. It was simultaneously a relief and a fright because Matthew had his arm poised to throw a bottle he found in a gutter to scare his brother, and now he had to duck not to be seen and hope the movement didn't catch his eye. He held his breath for a moment and shifted to further conceal himself in the shadows as Alfred changed his route to go around the memorial.

Matthew wondered if Alfred was thrown off because he had been checking the site nightly since Ludwig died... and now he couldn't, because someone else was looking after it now that it was a location of interest. Knowing his brother, he probably thought that unless he was the one doing it, it wasn't being done properly.

He glanced down the street before jogging after his brother, wary of what could be seen from the memorial as he moved to give a wide berth. As he moved past it, hiding behind the buildings of the street parallel, he caught sight of a single officer pacing in front of the statue with a ferocity that made Matthew shrink back on instinct. Even through the fog, something about the officer made his brain scatter to find the pieces of a picture he didn't know he desperately needed.

But he couldn't, and Matthew wasn't willing to sneak closer to find out at the cost of letting Alfred slip from his notice. And the cost of being caught on camera wasn't worth it when he had one objective and this officer was irrelevant.

At least he knew it wasn't Berwald. So unlike Ludwig, he wasn't going to be killed.

By the third hour, Matthew's excitement had completely tapered and turned into foreboding awareness as the impatience of waiting for something to happen ached. There was chatter on the radio, but it was all routine as the police continued their patrols and refused to believe that tonight would pass so peacefully.

Because they all knew it wouldn't. Matthew didn't believe it for a second either. Any moment now...

He walked past an alley when something caught his eye. His breath stilled and his body tensed as he sought to make sense of it before reacting, which in hindsight was very much like Alfred *that night*. That might have been the reason for him freezing because for a moment, his primal instincts screamed danger before he could even process it.

Through the alley, past more buildings, past shadows and silence, was the faintest flicker of red and blue.

Nothing on the radio had indicated that something had happened. He had the thought that it was a trap but he couldn't shake the feeling that he should look... And just like the night before, he was torn. He glanced over to where Alfred was disappearing into the fog and wrung his hands together as he debated.

In the end, it was no debate. He had to know. Matthew moved on what he could only believe was instinct and his choice had been made. As he crept towards the small reflection of the light and it grew brighter and brighter, he tried to rationalise what he was doing. That he wasn't abandoning his brother and putting him in danger because he was going the opposite way. That this was the only way he could finally get ahead with the information he had been starving for. That this couldn't be a trap because the silence that became deafening the closer he got was *familiar* and something he could identify as an aftermath...

He didn't know what to expect, but his unease exploded into a gripping sense of apprehension. Matthew lingered in the shadows as he assessed the scene he had stumbled upon, holding his breath as he waited for there to be a catch.

A catch that never came.

Knowing he didn't have the luxury of time on his side and any moment now could bring an interruption, he moved while it was still safe. Even then, every movement reminded him of a deer out in the open and he craved to conceal himself in the shadows just as much as he craved to *really* see the destruction in front of him.

There was a police car half-parked in the mouth of another alley. Its flashing lights felt alive while everything around it was stiller than death. At first, he thought the car was abandoned. He didn't know why or how he got that impression, but the thought just shot through his mind before he could analyse it. Maybe the car was abandoned... just not in the way he thought.

Then he smelt the blood. Even from a few feet away, it was pungent. Then he saw it - pools of oozing blood reflected the lights as the puddle crawled away from the body it once inhabited, taking all semblance of life with it.

There was a body on the ground, just in front of the hood of the car. The head was rendered from the shoulders along with all of the limbs, but one of the arms and legs was missing...

The chill he felt was unnatural and had nothing to do with the cool air around him. The pieces came to him instantly and he realised just how wrong he was to write this other killer off as a copycat. This was the Battle Axe Butcher... *this* is what Alfred had seen.

This was what he was competing with...

Matthew swallowed as he took in the state of the car. He didn't even know how one man could have done this, let alone fast enough that there was hardly even a fight. The metal frame and windshield had been hacked away and sprayed with blood from the inside. He didn't know how this was done or how long it had been here... but he was all too aware that any moment now, he wouldn't be alone.

But despite that, he couldn't tear his eyes away. Something pulled him to the scene, like two magnets passing by catching each other's fields and diverging from their path.

The driver's door was thrown open and inside looked like a bloodbath. The officer inside was only recognisable as lumps of flesh as he had been taken apart. The head sat on the lap and Matthew wanted to shrink as he made eye contact with it and it *stared*. Disgust at his reaction bubbled in his stomach because he wasn't so cowardly that he was intimidated by a corpse. A corpse held no power over him. No authority that he had to yield to. The uniform meant nothing and the eyes were unseeing. He couldn't help but stare back.

After a moment he managed to break away and glance down the street. He could see down it, but the ominous fog only made him wary that he could miss the moment someone else broke through the abyss and joined him. The shadows of the alley didn't bring him any comfort either, not when this scene was so *fresh*.

Matthew took a shuddering breath as he tried to think about what move he should make. The radio was silent in his ear and the urgency to do *something* with this was only making his thoughts scrambled.

Think. If this was his crime scene, if he had done this...

He had. When he first embraced his name as the Trail Killer, he had left his signature and moved on. Clearly, *whoever* did this was doing the same. This was supposed to be discovered and horrify

someone, and that someone had to be the police. Maybe even the Chief himself.

Matthew remembered when Ludwig tried to order a public blackout and how that had backfired. How it had ended with something so eerily similar to this...

The other killer was protesting that he wasn't being given his due credit. So he went above and beyond to shake a man who presented himself as unshakable.

Matthew took a breath and looked over the officers as his fingers twitched. For once, he was the one on top. Everything that happened during the day had been all because of him, and of course this other killer wanted that too. Matthew couldn't blame him in the slightest.

And he couldn't allow the Butcher to get caught.

Moving on instinct, Matthew surveyed the corpses quickly. They were missing their hats and badges, but their guns were there and scattered uselessly on the ground. He thought about taking them *knowing* that the police never published what happened to Ludwig's gun, but he refrained because it would be too much of a coincidence. Though the thought was certainly an entertaining one... he remembered the confidence he had while holding Ludwig's gun. He craved it. But despite Matthew's similarities to a hyena, the Trail Killer certainly wasn't one. He never wanted to be a bottomfeeder.

The police were missing their body cameras too. It seemed the other killer wasn't a complete idiot. But Matthew faltered when he saw the cruiser's dash cam was still in place. Without hesitating, he leaned over the body and the pooling blood dribbling from the seat and onto his shoes, to hastily rip it from its mount and put it in his pocket.

Less evidence for the police, more for his own cause. He wondered if the Copycat had left it there on purpose or if it was an oversight. Because of that, Matthew looked over the scene again to see if he had missed something. The officer on the ground looked like he had all his equipment... but the one in the car was obscured in shadows and that was how Matthew had missed the first time that the radio was missing. *Shit*.

This was getting worse faster than he ever expected.

The air was knocked from his lungs as his body seized on instinct. In the dead of night, he heard tyres slowly crunching and creeping on pavement, echoing through the streets. He didn't know how far away it was, or if it was even heading his direction, but as the air around him became impossibly hot, he knew he couldn't stick around.

He ran.

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He may hate himself for being a well-practiced deer, always acting like a fawn and shying away from threats because he had no confidence in fighting them off, but his instincts were never wrong. Not even thirty seconds later, the radio exploded with chaos as the police learned of what had transpired and the police broadcast it over their airwaves. To summarise with them being beyond horrified was an understatement. Matthew had to yank the earbud out because everything was beginning to overlap and grate on his as the volume rose and everything became more intense.

Still, he kept running. He knew the Battle Axe Butcher could be lurking and worse, Matthew had now lost Alfred. He spent the whole night hoping to run into him alive... or run into the Copy Cat and take him out before he could get to Alfred.

...

He found neither.

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Chapter End Notes

Something my friend made > https://www.tumblr.com/peacock-galaxy/817860184861016065/my-best-friend-painted-this-rock-for-me-when-we?source=share
yourlocalray1 (Ao3) | yourlocal_ray1 (tt) made a cool animation based on this! Find it here > https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTB1mdPR9/

I'm debating I add some personal life context here or in the next chapter, but I'll have a cool new update eventually. If the next chapter isn't on time, don't worry about it or be surprised. I promise I'll have a good excuse.

Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

> Everyone cross your fingers and toes that my poor 8+ year old chromebook, the very one with a battery health of 30% and 1050 charge cycles, survives until the end of September, because that's when I'll be replacing it. My contingency plan is now using my phone because my PC (which has no ethernet anyway 🫠) is on the other side of the world. Anyways, this is me announcing that I'm actually going to do something with my life! So far I haven't done or experienced anything and just rotted, and want some adventure so... yeah. For three months I'm going to do a work program in another country and do some travelling around it. Consider it on the boots journalism for writing a specific demographic. Let's just hope the Ao3 author's curse doesn't get me shot or something (so far so good! I just spent the last week in NYC and at some point I was so sick I thought I'd have to go to the h*spital (censored for you Am*ricans))
> Of course I'm sure you're all wondering what this means for the fic and fret not, you WILL have content. The uploading schedule might not be so strict though and have a few days diviance at most, it was only late for this chapter because I was so busy in NYC and the silver lining is I got a lot of good experience. I'm going to get to replying to comments when I can!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone knew that having mice in one's house was unacceptable. No one would tolerate such a thing and no one was expected to. The sanctuary of your home was non-negotiable and something to be revered, not treated with callous apathy. Rodents were unhygienic and carried disease with disastrous consequences if left unchecked. It would be wise to deal with them immediately as every minute of hesitation was a minute of opportunity for the filthy animals.

There were two main courses of action to exterminate unwanted vermin, routes that were both tried and true. There was the obvious option - scorched earth. You could hunt them down and set traps to ensure their demise. Bait them and watch as their own nature brings about their downfall. Execute every single one until none remain.

But the other option, the more *tedious* and less satisfying, was to starve them out.

Until now, all Alaric wanted to do was catch the Battle Axe Butcher as he roamed the streets and put an end to him while his arrogance was at an all time high. It was still possible, thanks to Basch's involvement now, but as every night never failed to bring grim news and its own weight in paperwork and grief, Alaric knew this couldn't go on.

Starving the Battle Axe Butcher had felt like admitting defeat because functionally, it was a stalemate. Now he could see it was necessary.

Alaric had learnt a long time ago that being in this position meant making hard decisions, though it wasn't until recently that he realised the real gravity of how difficult his job can be. As an officer, as the *Chief*, and as a grandfather. As a human being nearing the end of his rope.

So he wouldn't let himself hesitate. If he knew what he needed to do, his emotions would only hinder him should they cloud his vision. He gave the order and signed it with a firm hand. No officer will be on the streets at all during curfew; the risk was far too high and the consequences far too grave. Alaric never wanted anyone to die in the pursuit of justice.

This didn't have to mean defeat. He knew he could still spin it in his favour and make the most out of every closed door.

No one had to know about the order outside of the force. He had plenty of methods to prevent the public from catching wind of this and he would utilise the media well. He would have them make stories as if the police force were still patrolling and ever strong. All warfare is based on deception, both on the field and in the mind, something that the Art of War depicted well. No lie was immoral if it was to save another, and Alaric wouldn't have any more families crumbling under the agony of good intentions.

But he himself would not be saved from such a fate.

Discarded on his desk was more material hand-delivered from the Battle Axe Butcher. Alaric knew he should pin it to the elaborate crime board dedicated to the killer, but he couldn't help but linger.

There was a bloodstained letter from the night previous, found stuffed in the mouth of his latest victim. The crime scene had to have been sitting there for about ten minutes before being discovered and hidden behind dividers in record time. When Alaric inspected it in the morning, the air around it was suffocating with an intensity that only the inevitability of a disaster could bring.

The Battle Axe Butcher was adapting and worse than that, *challenging*. The elements inspired by the Trail Killer were obvious and Alaric was furious when he was reminded of Ludwig's own murder scene... But this level of boldness did not bode well when the killer had walked away from a scene like this with more confidence than ever, because he had come out on top.

At this rate, he would continue killing, breaking and entering and staging his kills in hopes the world would see it. He had turned on the lights of the police cruiser so it would be found... it wasn't just a copying move and an escalation, it was a *competition*. No one was safe, not when this ambitious behaviour said this was all for show, all a game to him.

Alaric thought he had been making progress. He had been doing everything he could to pull everything together behind the scenes and stick as many nails as he could in the metaphorical barricade to keep it in place, but it had all come crashing down anyway.

Cleaning up the city had been a nearly impossible effort, or at least when it came to the administrative procedure of having paperwork processed to get things done as quickly as he had liked. At this time, 90% of the city's alleys had been partitioned off and made private. Of course the Battle Axe Butcher had an *axe*, but it served as a deterrent or at least as an obstacle. It was supposed to be one small thing in the Chief's favour.

But of course not. One of the few areas yet to be processed had turned into yet another graveyard.

The plot had thickened when an inventory was taken of the scene and two notable staples of police equipment were missing. The first was a police radio, which was beyond frustrating to realise because there was no benefit of the doubt. There was no assumption of anything other than the worst possible outcome because to be so naive now would be foolish. Especially when he had his officers report and many of them said they heard someone breathing into it heavily while saying

nothing before ending the transmission. They also said they kept hearing the sound of scraping metal being broadcast before ending just as rapidly. None of them had known that the very devil they were hunting got his hands on a radio so no one had assumed anything insidious about the occasional odd broadcast.

But Alaric didn't have time to be furious. It was a waste of energy that was better spent channelled somewhere productive. He had to adapt. Desperate times called for innovative solutions... or at least ones that were long overdue.

So he'd have the officers larp, there was no other word for it. Was role-play really a professional term? Regardless, the Battle Axe Butcher had a radio and couldn't find out that there were no officers to hunt, so Alaric would have his force talk into the radio as if they were still out on the streets.

The second item of note was that both fallen officers were stripped of their handcuffs. Out of everything to take, why that? The killer had purposely overlooked the guns (thank *Gott*), tasers, pepper spray, batons, and other various items with the potential to be weaponised against another person...

But took handcuffs.

That concerned Alaric because the killer's choice wasn't influenced by a crunch for time. He could've taken it all if he really wanted to, but *didn't*. He knew what he wanted and it was *specific*. Was it just something to play with and feel a rush of power for him (likely) or because he was planning something (hopefully not, but possible given his pointed selection)...

Alaric sighed heavily, grounding himself as he sat in his office and stared at the evidence in front of him. He was going to put it away soon, but not before he could recite it in his sleep.

I have to hand it to you the memorial was great! But I don't get why Roderdick wasn't included because wasn't it to ALL victims? Unless it was just for the trail killer but you didn't even bring up the trail killer and you know he was watching. I knew it too and since the memorial wasnt about him then why didnt you bring up all the people I killed? Do you just not care about them? Or didn't you have time to get their names written on the statue? I guess the street thing you did for Roderick was pretty good and definitely nice so hopefully that makes you happy but what about all the other cops? Are you going to make something nice for all of them or don't they matter because they're not related to you. Dont get me wrong, I like Lud and he should have his time to shine but now its just obvious you're playing favoritism.

I hope you didnt care about these guys but probaby not because youre not going to put it on the news are you? Youre not going to tell everyone that all your guys are dying and that its my fault. I dont know where the Trail killers you could be censoring him too which isnt fair and you know it. hopefully you dont pay for it because if it comes to bite you in the ass its yourfault.

Maybe Alaric should weigh up what the Battle Axe Butcher's relationship with his parents would look like... it was a far more productive feeling than lingering on the feelings of guilt that began to claw at his throat.

But despite the tone of this letter, the other one clearly was written with a different purpose in mind. Alaric learnt that the Battle Axe Butcher had sent a letter to every news outlet... along with photos. Before even seeing them, he knew no description of them was necessary. The profile said it all, these would be *horrible* photos, ones that proved the Battle Axe Butcher was who he said he was to the news.

Being correct never brought any sense of satisfaction, the bastard had taken photos of everyone he killed. Their staged and degraded bodies were on display and the killer *loved* it. Alaric tucked the photos away, unwilling to analyse them further than necessary and only kept the letter on his desk.

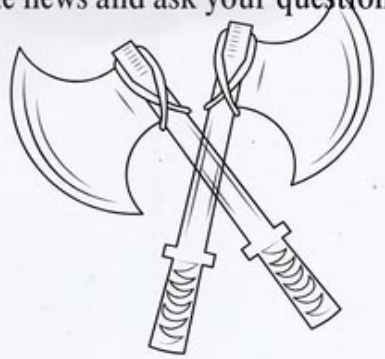
I don't know why you don't believe me so here's the evidence that I exist and am haunting this city like one of the gods of old. I am the Battle Axe Butcher and you're going to put me on the TV because everyone needs to know that I'm real and that Im beating the police. You wouldn't stop talking about the trail killer so why won't you talk about me now? I'm literally handing you a gold story on a silver platter and you're not taking it! Whats wrong with you! Are you scared of murder now?

Come on the trail killer isnt that special because anyone can do what he does. He just goes up to people and kills them! Anyone can do that and get away with it! The cops suck so bad and its a 50% chance you get away with murder so why don't you put that on the news because that's scary isn't it? If you kill a total stranger all you have to do is flip a coin to see if you'll get away with it because the cops suck that bad.

Im not saying the trail killer isnt special and he's definitely a warrior because he has the guts to do what he wants unlike normal people. Normal people pretend to be so good but they just want to hurt people too. They want to be famous and to be feared and to have fun but for some reason they pretend they dont because everyone wants to fit in and to fit in you have to act like everyone else. I know everyone wants to hurt someone and would if they could.

If you want to know more about me then all all you have to do is ask! Obviously I cant tell you who I am but I can tell you lots of interesting things like if you want to know how I did it and what I can do and things like that. I can tell you about how easy it is to stay ahead and not get caught and I can move faster than my prey to get the upperhand and win. The cops are barely a challenge because I get the drop on them and they can't take me. You all better hopes that I wont find the Trail killer while Im out there because if I do we're going to team up and it will be awesome because the both of us will never get court

Anways if you want me to reply all you have to do is put this on the news and ask your questions there, I'll be watching! If you don't then maybe you'll be next



Finally, Alaric reread the letter the FBI had sent him with their assessment of the case and he knew what he had to do. He'd be foolish to wait on only one scheme and hope that the odds were in his favour with Basch now in the picture. But he couldn't wait any longer. Because while the Battle Axe Butcher would be out at night, once he realised what was going on, he would certainly find a way to achieve what he wanted. Which would easily be described in a single word. ***Carnage***.

While he had been consistently targeting officers, Alaric couldn't expect that to stay the same when the killer realised that there were no fish in the sea. In fact, the Battle Axe Butcher didn't even have to realise it, all he had to do was grow bored and restless enough to decide it was time to esulate yet again. He wanted a bloodbath and anyone would do. The odds of him going after those who worked for the media and publishing... unfortunately, weren't zero. He wasn't opposed to breaking into someone's house to do it either, and if it got to that point, it wouldn't be a surprise if he went after someone *specific*. After all, he wanted a name for himself.

Alaric would not be surprised if he was on the top of the killer's list, especially after the stunt Gilbert pulled... putting the Chief's name out there and dangling it like a carrot on a stick. A challenge to be claimed.

Luckily, Alaric had a plan in mind that would slowly close around the Battle Axe Butcher and hold him like a vice.

It'll only take a couple of days before the Battle Axe Butcher realised that the streets were empty or grew bored of endlessly roaming, but luckily, a couple of days was all Alaric needed.

By trying to do it all and have it all, the Chief realised he certainly made a mistake with the public memorial. Not that it was a mistake to have held it - the significance couldn't be understated and the footage from that event would be paired with Roderich's street memorial and Ludwig's funeral... it would provide an exhaustive list of suspects for both killers.

But it was a mistake to have all his eggs in one basket. No, not a mistake, but now he saw an opportunity with Roderich's funeral now that his vision had been refined.

The Trail Killer was irrelevant. Alaric had to push him out of mind and accept that he could afford it. All he had to do was focus on what he knew - the undeniable fact that the Battle Axe Butcher knew Roderich and Gilbert personally, or at least parasocially.

All Alaric had to do was host a small, modest and private funeral for his grandson, like he had wanted all along. Cameras wouldn't be necessary, no elaborate games or surveillance would need to be in place. The Battle Axe Butcher would be there, and so would Alaric.

If he invited everyone from Roderich's contact list, along with their households and gave them the option of bringing a plus one, his grandson's killer would be among them. Then, if he tailored the invitation with phrasing that it was *non-obligatory*, those not close to him wouldn't feel pressured to attend. But the Battle Axe Butcher would by any means necessary, desperate to revel in the aftermath he caused. Desperate for the glory and the proof.

Then all Alaric had to do was speak to each guest individually, and victory would be guaranteed. To assist with his process of elimination, he thought it was time he started training Oxenstierna in profiling. He would just have to assert that due to a conflict of interest, Oxenstierna would be barred from assessing anyone he knew personally. The man was soft on the inside, but unlike his young employee, Alaric had nothing but hollowness within.

With a grunt, he stood from his desk, leaning heavily on the edge as he waited for the black spots dancing across his vision to vanish. Once they did, he cleared his desk and pinned the evidence where it belonged on the tangled web of a crime board he had installed in his office.

Right now, his priority would be planning his grandson's funeral. He already knew he should schedule it to be early in the morning, so it would force the Battle Axe Butcher to either be sleep deprived or just not go out the night before. Both desirable outcomes...

The silver lining would be that he had time to plan it and wouldn't have to wake up to terrible news on the streets in the meantime. That would be a welcome reprieve.

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Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The streets were coldest before the dawn. Matthew was still roaming even as light broke on the horizon and chased all the shadows back into the crevices where they belonged. But he wouldn't let it chase him away, not yet. Despite the light bringing an official end to the curfew for yet another night, Matthew kept moving.

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He found himself home before he knew it. He didn't even remember climbing through his window and opening his door- But then he heard the sound of something being persistently tapped with more force and volume than necessary, and something unlodged in his chest.

Or something tightened, it was hard to know.

Alfred was here, and thank fuck for that. Of course nothing happened to him. Matthew knew nothing would've happened to him...

Stepping into the bathroom, he immediately saw his brother banging his toothbrush against the side of the porcelain sink instead of over it, spraying water everywhere. Annoyance immediately arose and began to churn at the prime example of how his brother being inconsiderate and thoughtless.

"Do you have to do that?" Matthew forced out, his words almost growled to fight the volume of Alfred's action. He knew this would start a fight, but considering what he saw last night, Alfred's aggression was hardly of any consequence.

"What? I want it dry," Alfred retorted as he put his toothbrush in place. "You'd want yours dry."

"But it's loud and messy!" Matthew insisted, because why was his brother so thick that he couldn't just have a little consideration? Especially when Matthew was going to be the one cleaning it up? Alfred was oblivious to most of the things that happened around the house because Matthew always put them back, as if nothing had ever been out of place!

"Don't care," Alfred said as he brushed past before stopping in the doorway. "Oh, also, I used up all the anti-fog wipes so those gotta be replaced."

Then he sauntered away, presumably to go to bed. Matthew scoffed into the silence before groaning into his hands.

Would it really be so bad if the Butcher got to his twin? It was a vindictive thought but considering what happened with Roderich...

yes. Yes, it would be.

Thinking about his adversary reminded him of the weight in his pocket and despite his own aching eyes, they darted to make sure Alfred *was* in his room before Matthew shut himself in his own.

He *needed* to see that dashcam footage. If it had a clue, *any clue*, he had to know.

With bated breath, he plucked it from his pocket. He inspected the device until he found the SD card and quickly set it up to view it, making sure to wear headphones as his chest heaved in anticipation. The last thing he wanted was to give Alfred a reason to come in here and ruin everything...

He could picture it too, his brother barging in because he heard something and decided he had a right to get involved. Maybe he'd even storm in with his gun because he was that paranoid. Would he even question how Matthew got this footage? There was no guessing what conclusions Alfred could come to if he saw whatever came next...

Matthew didn't know what to expect, but given the scene he found last night, there was no way that it wasn't going to be explosive. He swallowed thickly as he pressed play and waited.

There was a lot of footage of those officers just driving around and talking.
Whatever they had to say that *wasn't* said on the radio could be extremely valuable, but it just seemed the two officers knew each other and were discussing where they'd want to travel if they ever had time off.

Matthew briefly wished he had the foresight to keep the footage from the night he killed Ludwig. He told himself he did what he thought was right at the time by disposing of it, but if he had only kept either SD card from the dashcam or body cam...

Matthew knew what they said about hindsight and he mourned the missed opportunity. He wished he could rewatch it. He wanted nothing more than to indulge himself in the moment and relish the high, but all he had was a memory.

It was still vivid in his mind...

He inched forward on the footage as he tried to estimate when the incident occurred. He found it when he skipped to his own apprehensive face, glancing at the car while the red and blue lights illuminated the alleyway. Matthew paused there.

He was so close... all he had to do was wind it back. He did so slowly on the little bar along the bottom of the screen, unable to see much because of the lighting and how small it was, but he kept going until he was sure the car was moving.

Then he pressed play.

The police were sitting in silence as they cruised slowly, eyes scanning the road and adjoining streets.

Then they saw something and were turning... right into that alleyway. This was it. It was going to happen. Matthew never expected how.

A dog was sitting there. A nice little white dog that the police had spotted and wanted to check on.

That was all that it took? A clever ruse that didn't even give the police the advantage of being suspicious and reach for their radios, let alone their guns.

The first officer left the car and approached the dog, cooing kindly.

"We should see if it's chipped," the officer still in the car suggested as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "Its poor owner must be stressed if it got out before curfew..."

"At least there aren't many cars around and we all drive slowly," The other's voice was muffled by distance as he shuffled towards the dog. "Hey buddy..."

It happened too fast. Out of nowhere came a blur of black, silver, and *red*. Blood went everywhere as the officer who was kneeling by the dog fell against the car and then out of view onto the ground.

The dog scurried away into the alley as the officer in the car screamed. He barely had any time to react before the Battle Axe Butcher leapt across the car and metal screeched as what had to be an *axe* tore through it like butter, loud and abrupt. The cruiser shook as it was attacked. Blood sprayed the inside of the windscreen.

Then there was silence... the car continued to shake as squelching sounds filled the car and more blood sprayed, only with less velocity that suggested it was from the motion of an axe and not the pressure of a heartbeat...

Then there was a loud clatter as silver cut off most of the screen and Matthew realised the axe was buried right into the hood of the car as the killer turned on the car's flashing lights. There was a moment of shuffling and heavy breathing... then there was some movement behind the axe and it seemed the killer was fussing over the other body now...

Then, after a moment, there was a sharp whistle. Another moment passed before the axe was removed from the car, making an awful scraping noise as a lingering silence suffocated the scene.

Then that was it. It was exactly how he had found it... *two minutes later*...

Surely the Battle Axe Butcher had been long gone by then... surely he didn't stick around... if he intended the scene to be found, he likely would've left as soon as possible *especially* when he had taken evidence with him! Matthew had never gone through with doing anything to his victims once their eyes were lifeless, in fact he hadn't really considered it. Not before his graveyard at least.

But the Butcher was something else, and Matthew was glad he didn't cross paths with him without being prepared. At least now... he knew what he was up against.

Even if it made him feel equally as threatened.

The odds of the Butcher still being there... while Matthew was oblivious to someone's lingering predatory gaze...

It wasn't possible. Matthew would've felt it. He just knew the Butcher had left and didn't even consider that anyone besides the police would see the scene he left for them to discover.

Matthew watched the recording over and over until he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer... it was almost impossible to pry them open and make out the shapes and colours on the screen. It was only then that he turned it off and tucked the dashcam in a drawer to deal with later.

He slumped on top of his bed, not even bothering to crawl under the covers. Even as he relaxed and sank, he couldn't stop thinking about what he saw the night before as everything played out in his mind.

The moment the Butcher turned on the lights was when Matthew noticed something in his peripheral vision... if it were just a few seconds earlier, Alfred would've seen it. He would've been the first to discover it, and who knows how he would've taken it.

At least Matthew got to see it at all, and it was just him and the police. Not that they knew the Trail Killer was involved at all.

Shit. Maybe it was his sleep-deprived brain that tormented him with the belated opportunity, but hindsight only made him suffer with indecision because while he *knew* it was a stupid idea... it was compelling.

He had been at the scene of the Battle Axe Butcher's crime! It was something he had only heard about second hand on the radio but he had really been right there! He could've *fucked* with it! He should've drawn his signature on the foreheads of both of those police officers, claiming that crime as his own. Stealing it from the *Copycat* just like how the other killer stole Roderich from *him*.

It would've come at the cost of announcing to the police that he was still around *and* breaking curfew, which was not worth the cost. He needed to keep the police on an information diet if he wanted to stay ahead, but it was nice to fantasise about... imagining what would've happened even if he never got to see it because he had no police connection. Overall, it was a shame that Ludwig wasn't here because he would've been horrified about how this all unfolded. Seeing his reaction would've been really entertaining...

But now Matthew could only imagine it.

Would the police have assumed the whole scene was his had he left his signature? Or would they think that both serial killers had teamed up and were working together? It would certainly throw off their profiles...

Even as scenes and lights flashed behind his eyes, Matthew *knew* he did the right thing. Even if it was hard to stomach. Just like with Arthur's murder, the best thing he could do is nothing and try not to think about *what ifs*. Had he been caught in or after the act, it would be all over because only the Trail Killer knew that signature and there would be no denying it.

Besides... his graveyard was far more gruesome than anything the police would expect to see... and that was not an end he intended to leave loose. They didn't know he was active at all; they wouldn't ever see it coming.

Still, it felt like he passed up an opportunity to do something. He could've taken one of the chopped off heads to his graveyard to later be linked to the scene, proving he had been watching all along... all it did was buy him time because the police would assume it was the Butcher, who wouldn't be able to say he hadn't done that because Matthew would kill him and the police wouldn't learn about the inconsistencies until too late.

Maybe all he could do was take inspiration from the Butcher and try to outdo him whenever Matthew decided he was ready to announce that he was still in the game.

But as he shifted in bed, slowly sinking into a comfortable weightlessness, it came to him.

The police would keep looking for the Battle Axe Butcher. They wouldn't stop until they found somebody or *a body*.

And they would... in the Trail Killer's clutches, concealed by the woods that started this all.

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He was in that eerie alleyway, knife out and poised. On the defensive. He didn't know why, just that something inside him just screamed that he needed to be ready.

The ground squelched and he realised he was stepping in blood. Pooling blood, trickling from ahead...

Matthew wouldn't even know how much blood the human body could hold if he didn't see it.

Alfred was in that puddle, sprawled out, gun uselessly by his side. White dog sitting beside him, tail wagging like it wasn't soaking up filth.

His consciousness shifted and he realised he was in bed, sweating onto the covers.

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Matthew woke up fully when he heard noises in the house. His brother was up, *inconsiderately* being louder than necessary. Matthew scowled but he didn't know how to feel about it. He didn't know if he could feel anything at all besides tired.

He didn't realise that he had fallen asleep to begin with or even that he could, and when he glanced at the clock, he felt a pang of frustration. He only slept about *four* hours, so he'd have to nap later before going hunting. His head felt stuffy and he doubted he could fall asleep again now, especially with Alfred banging around the kitchen.

After taking some pills for his head from his personal stash, Matthew joined his brother and held back comments about how reheating food shouldn't be such an event.

"Dude, there's like nothing in the fridge," Alfred mumbled unprompted, sitting at the table as he leaned his head heavily on one hand and ate with the other.

"There's a lot in the fridge," Matthew double checked anyway, though he should've known to stand his ground because he was *right*. "See?"

"Yeah, but there's no quick food. I'm tired as fuck, why would I wanna put something together?"

Right.

"I haven't had time to cook," Matthew stated as a fact, not an apology. He grabbed some ingredients to make a sandwich.

"Just sayin'," Alfred mumbled. "I thought you liked to cook."

Matthew started making the sandwich, trying not to be irritated by the fact that he wasn't alone in the kitchen. Working with Alfred in here was throwing him off when he was used to moving through life without someone watching his every move. Why couldn't his brother eat anywhere else?

"You didn't sleep for long," Matthew eventually said as he finished his sandwich, putting the rest of the ingredients away immediately because it wasn't that hard.

"Yeah well it's not like everyone knows I've got a fucked up sleep schedule," Alfred huffed. "I'll just sleep later. Or skull an energy drink. Same thing."

Matthew would certainly be doing the same, but he wondered what Alfred was implying by his first comment. Maybe he could goad his brother into telling him.

"Did Gilbert finally reach out to you?" It was stupid and he should've gone with something better *because* of course Gilbert knew Alfred was going out at night so it didn't make any sense. But luckily, Alfred was just as sleep-deprived as he was.

"*Tch*, fuck no. But I should probably try to fuckin' get to him again cus uh..." Alfred rubbed his head as his speech slurred. "Fuck it, I've gotta treat myself dude, I'm having an energy drink now. Canya pass me one?"

Matthew hoped whatever drama Alfred had to say was worth it as he found one in the fridge and handed it to his brother, who gulped a few mouthfuls greedily.

He sighed as he wiped his mouth and groaned. "Fuck."

"So is Gilbert okay?" Matthew really doubted he was, but that would at least get his brother back on track.

"I would *not* fucking know dude," Alfred scoffed, rubbing his face. "Um, no, I got called this morning by the police because they wanted to follow up on whatever yesterday... But I think I'm all good."

Thank goodness for that because Matthew had momentarily worried that they were going to grill Alfred about something new, about something related to *him*, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"And then uh... oh my God, this is gonna be so 'he said she said'," Alfred grumbled. "Toni called- Toni with an *I* and not Tony with an *Y*... A *Y*? Um, apparently Roderich's gonna have a funeral and wake or whatever and it's *not* a trap."

Matthew highly doubted that. But it wasn't like he was in a position to let that be known. "Really? He is? Do you know anything about it?"

"Uh, just that Toni said everyone who was friends with Roderich can go. Or he said 'acquainted' so... I dunno. I'm going, obviously... it's gonna be rough though."

"Yeah, probably, eh?" So it wasn't being advertised as a trap. Or the Chief just had to make everyone believe that or they wouldn't comply, *again*. "When is it?"

"Uh... in two days? At like eight in the fucking morning..." Alfred groaned, a whimper escaping his throat as he rubbed at his temples. "I dunno man... I don't fuckin' know..."

Matthew grabbed some pills from the cupboard and pushed them over to Alfred, who took them immediately.

"So do you think it's actually a private funeral?" He continued.

"Apparently, *yeah*. Which is good cus Gilbert has made it pretty clear how much he hates that it's a whole circus for everything." Alfred made some hand motions before letting them fall lifelessly on the table.

That meant a much smaller crowd... this had to be a plot and if it was, it was for the Battle Axe Butcher. After what happened last night, of course the Chief would feel the need to take action. But Matthew still wondered, why so soon? Why at all? Surely they were investigating people from the memorial that was literally yesterday. But he knew the Chief was desperate and wanted to bring this to an end as soon as possible... or maybe the Chief was doing everything he could with every opportunity. After all, he had to bury his second murdered grandson sooner rather than later, and there would be consequences if he didn't.

Maybe it was just a means to refine their lists and follow up on more individuals. Conduct some more interviews but somehow make them discreet so they couldn't be accused of being insensitive in a funeral setting... After all, a lot of people connected to Roderich were also connected to the Trail Killer. Maybe the Chief had more than Alfred to follow up with...

Well, it was a no-brainer that Alfred would be going and Matthew could easily go along with him. Until then, Matthew also had to make the most of every opportunity. He had considered that he missed an opportunity when he didn't loot the police bodies for himself, even when it would've been blamed on the Butcher.

Right now he just had obligations, and the dashcam was one of them. He left Alfred to mope as he stepped into his bedroom, quietly retrieving the device from the drawer while willing his brain to come up with a course of action.

In the end, he taped the SD card to the underside of the desk because he remembered seeing that in some random spy movie Alfred was playing really loudly years ago... As for the dashcam, he pulled it apart to dispose in different trash cans while he was out next. The sooner that thing was out of his hands, the better.

In fact, he thought he should do that now. Being out and in the world was better than being around Alfred, and if he walked through where the scene was last night, he might hear something interesting from the people who lived there. After all, once upon a time, all he could do was observe people living their lives with a sense of frustration and resentment. This time, it would be with a sense of anticipation and instead of studying them, he'd be gathering information.

Before leaving, he checked in on his brother, who was still at the kitchen table. Though his head was completely resting on both arms and Matthew didn't know if he *was* asleep or just desperately wished he was.

Matthew snuck out quietly regardless, all while his thoughts churned about his brother.

Alfred was really annoying. His friends were really annoying. Matthew's brief opportunity of spending time with them during the memorial and in the grocery store afterwards had brought back his resentment with a vengeance. Somehow, he had forgotten how much animosity he harboured inside of him and it brought him back to his earlier days when the Trail Killer first got the taste of blood.

He never had a voice, and now neither did those who took it from him.

The grocery store had been a frustrating experience that brought the word *always* back to the forefront of his mind because it had fucking *always* been like this. Once upon a time he bore the burden of it himself and drove himself into the ground as he tried to work out just what was so wrong with him.

But it was nothing, it had *never* been him.

He got the answers he wanted in that store but it hadn't been without great effort. If he tried to join into the group conversation, there just wasn't an opening for him. Any words that he forced out were left lingering, either unaddressed or entirely unheard. Any sentiment of humour, intrigue or bonding was just ignored, in favour of the other person being fixated on someone else. Someone would bring up a conversation they had earlier and say they couldn't remember a detail that Matthew did, but his offering of information could be repeated twice, thrice, seven times, and it would still fall on deaf ears.

He told himself he kept going because it was all for his social facade, a survival necessity, but that didn't stop the ache from spreading inside him as all he could think was *this is a humiliation ritual*.

There was no participation - there was only watching on from the sidelines with the pressure of a hand around his throat.

Why did it hurt so much when it was something he had *always* known? He had slipped through the cracks. He was never going to be like them and he was never going to have a community.

But that was fine now. He preferred to be confident alone than to be surrounded by people who didn't care whether he lived or died.

But boy, did he have a preference for them.

He had a plan in mind, all he had to do was turn this feeling of rotting from the inside into motivation to set the dominoes up and make sure they got knocked down.

Starting with the Battle Axe Butcher. Then he would get to everyone who made him feel like nothing in that grocery store and best of all! It would *NEVER* be connected back to him because how could he ever forget that he wasn't an *afterthought*, he simply wasn't fucking thought of *at all*!

He couldn't live as 'Matthew', that had been made abundantly clear. And why the fuck would he? Fuck all of them. He was the Trail Killer and that was something that he could pour his cup into that would always pour back. He'd empty his salty water and when he held his cup out, crimson would flow in and everything would be vindicated.

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Somehow, tonight was colder than the last. Foggier too. Making out the details of things on the horizon was impossible.

Matthew crept in the shadows once again, his paranoia both simultaneously heightened and softened by the fact that the police would struggle to see him just as much as he'd struggle to see them. The bitterness of the day also contributed to his apathy and the alarm anyone else would feel was completely negated to only calculated caution. Over the radio, everything was running the same as always... only now everyone was talking about the night before. He had to wonder if they were ordered to because they wouldn't talk about anything else for too long.

He hated to say it, but he liked it. Hearing them go on about the morbid details in horrified voices... it was entertaining. Even if it was thrilling, it made him envious. Once he dealt with the Butcher... once he finally had a night where he had a victim in his grasp who he cared about, he could be back on track. Soon enough, it would all be about him again.

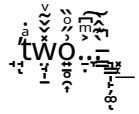
Then static came over the radio and their conversation was disturbed by the sound of metal hijacking the airwaves, like something being dragged on the ground. The cops hesitated and shakily continued the conversation like they didn't hear it, one of them chalking it up to bad reception and blowing it off.

But Matthew knew immediately what it was. It was a sound he wouldn't forget when he heard it that morning and saw the result of it the night before. The other killer had a radio and was letting *everyone* know. Surely the cops knew too. More scraping metal cut through the radio and it made him nervous. This killer wanted to do something worse, he just knew it, but he didn't know what to expect except the *worse*. Whatever that was.

Matthew hoped he came across him sooner or later... he had a lot of pent-up energy to direct towards that killer.

Throughout the night, there were more instances of strange sounds and interference. Sometimes the chatter would cut out just to play a few seconds of silence... or heavy breathing... sometimes even whispering that made Matthew pause and hold his breath as he tried to desperately make out the words.

All to no avail.



Chapter End Notes

Okay now I'm getting excited 😈 also I'll get to comments asap!

Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

> Here you are everyone, enjoy! I certainly will and you're more than welcome to scream at me 😈 You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something wasn't right about these streets. Matthew didn't know what, but there was an echo that whispered to him, one that was like a siren's call coming from deep, murky depths. One louder than the choppy waters that threatened to make him disappear forever. One that made his hair stand on end and his muscles tense...

Maybe he was on edge because of the night before. *Somehow*, the *other* killer, whatever he was called, didn't do anything. Considering how *something* had happened every night without fail... he found it highly suspicious that the other killer didn't leave his mark last night.

There was no reason for it not to have been reported on the radio channel. It wasn't a case of police blackout once again. Everything was just normal last night...

Even if it was just a fluke, Matthew anticipated the worst if the other killer wanted to make up for it *tonight*.

Matthew had been highly cautious and made sure to sleep before going out because even if the Butcher wanted to strike, there was no guarantee that it would be the end of the night. If anything, it could be just the beginning...

Which was really inconvenient with Roderich's funeral and wake being first thing in the morning, but he supposed that was exactly what the Chief had planned. If the Butcher went all out tonight, he would have a hard time masking his exhaustion tomorrow...

If Matthew didn't spot him tonight, he would definitely spot him tomorrow. Being in a room with only a small number of people compared to what the Chief had organised in the past... Matthew *would* see him.

But so would the police. So he had to keep moving because either way, he was running out of time.

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The night went on... nothing. Even Alfred, who had no context and was going in blind, seemed extra fidgety tonight. There were a couple of close calls where Matthew almost got sprung following him, but that was partially due to having to keep his brother on a shorter leash because of the fog.

As much as he would *like* to put some distance between them so Matthew could breathe easier, he couldn't. Not when the hours stretched on, the atmosphere plummeted... and the fog thickened.

Alfred roamed more haphazardly than usual and while it could be him growing stupidly bold because of the fog, Matthew also thought it was partly because with Roderich's funeral tomorrow... his brother was reaching another breaking point. Matthew couldn't blame him; he was as well. Despite the silence of the night, his thoughts would not relent. He needed to take care of the Butcher before the police could build more evidence and snatch him before Matthew could.

The night grew darker. Everything was fine until Matthew's breath became lodged in his throat and his muscles tensed like he needed to run. Because that was how he felt. *He needed to run*.

He had *never* felt something like this before, something that grappled him so violently that he felt like a wounded animal ready to fight to the death.

It took a lot of effort to convince himself to pull the earbud out when his hands wouldn't move, removing the comforting chatter of the police and leaving him with only the sound of his own laboured breath. It was coming out so lethargically, he wondered if he was going to pass out from his *own body's attempt to keep him silent*.

It should've infuriated him that it was wired into his very DNA to silence himself and shrink as a means of survival, but that didn't matter now. He couldn't waste time thinking about it now. All he could do was stare, fixated ahead, where Alfred's silhouette was moving in the fog...

Matthew listened. There was a reason he was feeling like this. He dared himself to move and press his back against a wall so he could see it before it happened-

Somewhere in his general vicinity... he heard scuffling. He didn't know where, or how far away, but he just *knew* it was coming his way.

Then he heard a scrape.

He needed to get Alfred to move, *now*.

Wait. No. No. No.

This was what he wanted. This could work. Alfred was walking ahead and he'd be gone. Out of sight, out of mind. Irrelevant and out of the question and Matthew would be *free* to finally get what he wanted. To *finally* put an end to his adversary once and for all.

He took one deep breath, then another. He didn't need to feel like a cornered animal. He *never* wanted to feel like a cornered animal ***again***.

He knew what he was up against and was ready to struggle for it. He was up against a tall man with an axe. A villain that sounded like something right out of a shitty Hollywood movie that only Alfred would claim was art when it *wasn't*.

Matthew was quiet and *whoever* was approaching him was not. He just knew whoever was coming his way had a reason to move so boldly and Matthew quietly took his blade from his pocket and flicked it open.

He didn't know how he was going to do it, but he was going to take the other killer alive and drag him to the park... He took a mental inventory of his equipment as he strained to hear more shuffling and a muffled *twang* of something hitting metal.

Matthew could make him hesitate. He was used to being underestimated and he could find a ruse or a lie so no fighting was necessary. The Butcher could lower the axe voluntarily and a struggle wouldn't even be on the table.

He didn't have much time. If he had to use a ruse, then so be it, but he had a feeling he'd *know* what to do when he saw the other killer, saw their face and read them like he had done his entire life-

His entire body jerked when something grabbed him from behind and a hand stifled his wordless shout. Before he could even retaliate with his knife, that arm was seized and contorted behind his back. He thrashed with all his might, trying to bite the fabric digging into his cheeks and rip his bent arm free.

He was nothing more than a cornered animal but *fuck it,* ***so what***? Why wouldn't he fight with all he had? How ***dare*** others think he's weak picking? How ***dare*** anyone think they deserved to treat him like shit? They wouldn't treat a dog the way they had treated him. But at least a dog would bark and snarl and bare its teeth while 'Matthew' just took it...

Between his heaving chest and thudding heart making his ears ring, he couldn't hear whoever had a hold of him was *shushing* him.

Actually... logic caught up to him and his movements halted. Obviously, this wasn't an officer... otherwise he would've been apprehended differently. There would've been shouting, guns pointed and rights read... and handcuffs instead of a hand over his mouth.

If this was the Battle Axe Butcher... well, Matthew saw what he could do already. He didn't know if that killer would hesitate for a civilian... but if he did, why shush them? *He* was the danger on the streets and...

And whoever came up behind him was *not* the source of that scuffling... in fact, that same dread that *something* was nearby still twisted in his stomach. Whoever was holding him now came from the opposite direction and they were still in the vicinity of danger. Matthew thrashed again because he needed to get this person to let him go *now*.

"You're coming with me now." *Ivan*. It was Ivan.

Matthew's chest heaved from efforts that went nowhere as Ivan fought to keep him restrained. That pleased him a *little*, knowing he wasn't just an effortless victim for the Russian. In fact it brought him some vindictive pride. But it didn't compare to the rising panic that his situation was taking a turn for the worse, especially when Ivan started *dragging him*.

"You should not be here."

He needed to explain that the killer was close- that the killer could hear them-!

No. He seized up. If the killer could hear them... this could go one of two ways.

The first would be their deaths. The Battle Axe Butcher hadn't scored last night or this night, so he would be desperate. Right now, they were sitting ducks because they were both caught up in Matthew's struggle and couldn't hear him coming. It would still spite the cops if they realised civilians were dead because they couldn't do their jobs properly.

Matthew could *not* let things end this way. He had things he needed to see through.

The other would be that the Butcher appeared and *didn't* kill them. But then Matthew would *never* get his time with him because Ivan would think this killer was the *Trail Killer* and decimate him on the spot.

Matthew hated that his only option now was to play the long game and appease this bully who couldn't be reasoned with, so he sagged and went limp. After a couple of moments, Ivan loosened his hold and released the hand over Matthew's mouth, but kept a firm hold on his wrist as he dragged him along.

This was Matthew's opportunity to talk and reason, but that wasn't the first thing at the forefront of his mind as he realised he was comfortable. Not with this situation, *hell no*, but whatever instinct had its hand around his throat before... was gone.

The Battle Axe Butcher wasn't here... and he had a whole new problem.

"Where are you taking me?" Was there any point in asking nicely, in presenting his sweetness when it had never earned him compassion before? When had it never given him an inch of leeway despite the miles and miles he trudged just to try and prompt others to be kinder towards him and inspire mercy?

No. His question came out accusatory, but at least, given these circumstances, he felt justified. If Ivan was allowed to run around at night and break curfew, so how dare he stop someone else from doing the same!

"I am taking you home," Ivan stated. "You are not allowed to be here."

Now that he wasn't holding Matthew taunt against his body, Matthew could see the Russian fisting his pipe with his other hand. He considered trying to slip his knife from one hand into the other, but from the way his hand was bent and tensed, he didn't know if it was possible without tipping Ivan off.

"Why not?" Matthew grunted, lips curling as he was tugged along like this. The fabric concealing his face had been ripped off and lost in the scuffle and now his breath was visible in front of him. Just like his hair, strands fluffed around in every direction, obscuring part of his face. "You're out here! You know what it's like to *need* to be out here!"

He knew he probably sounded like his brother right now and he hoped that was part of the appeal. Ivan and Alfred got along when it mattered and since what he was saying wasn't false, surely this counted as a time of importance.

"You are Alfred's brother, da?" Ivan tightened his hold. "I like Alfred. He would not want you out here so I am taking you home."

"What?!" Matthew really couldn't articulate any better and it felt like he was scrambling.

"You cannot be out here," Ivan stated again, hold impossibly tight around his forearm. "You are in danger and what can little knife do?"

That wasn't fair! Maybe Ivan and Alfred were more alike than he knew because clearly both of them regarded him with such incompetence that they both thought they knew what was best for him!

He didn't even know how to negotiate with that but he had to be let go, *now*. Alfred was still nearby, and *so was the other killer*. If Ivan really cared for Alfred, then this was such an ironic turn of events. The Battle Axe Butcher was somewhere nearby, *just like Alfred*! Not that Matthew could say it, otherwise Ivan would make sure he got the 'Trail Killer' all to himself and that could never happen. Matthew didn't want to compete and he was *sick* of people getting in his way. So sick of people having first dibs on what he wanted.

But once again, he was forced to consider the endgame. Getting away from Ivan's hold was a top priority, but not an easy one. If he fought him off now and ran, Ivan would chase. Then Matthew would not have a second chance later.

If he was a cornered animal, then he was a rat. He loathed that he had to resort to scheming like this. He was confident that he would outsmart Ivan and liked the game that proved he was smarter, but he didn't have the time.

He would have to pretend to accept defeat and fall off Ivan's radar first. Which could be achieved by his pressing secondary priority; Ivan could *not* say anything to Alfred about learning that his brother had been sneaking out at night. Ivan and Alfred communicated often and the Russian knew that Matthew wasn't a part of the plan.

At best, the dynamic would shift and Alfred's wannabe hero complex would suffocate Matthew. At worst... he didn't want to picture that outcome.

So he was forced to negotiate and twist reality, to say everything and anything.

"Okay look... I'm really sorry about going out at night, eh? I guess I just got so worried about Al that I had to make sure that he was okay. Please don't tell him, this is the first night I went out and only because I was so curious about what he had been doing... I won't go out again though because it's really scary at night and I'm starting to think I'm not cut out for it like you guys are..."

Wait, something wasn't right. He had been so caught up *thinking* he didn't realise;

"You're going the wrong way, eh?" He tried to chuckle so it would sound nice, but there was a worried edge to it. He *knew* Ivan knew where he lived...

"I said I am taking you home," Ivan replied. "My home."

There was only one silver lining to this situation and that was that Ivan's residence was closer than his. Ergo less time wasted, but Matthew was left with more uncertainty than before.

"Uh, why?" He kept the tone casual because if it was anything but, then Ivan would be suspicious.

"My sister will look after you," Ivan replied. "She will make sure you stay safe."

"Wait, so you're going back out?" Matthew phrased it like a desperate plea for *don't do that*, but he knew it would fall on deaf ears. Good. He needed Ivan to get out of his way.

"*Da*, I must keep searching." Ivan pat Matthew's shoulder with the hand holding the pipe. "I will look for you too. You don't need to worry about brother, he is clever and strong."

That's what Ivan thought anyway, but Matthew knew better. He remembered Alfred that night he saw the Butcher... and every day and night after that. Alfred was clearly putting on an act for Ivan

too, but it didn't matter if Ivan saw it or not because Matthew had his intentions and if Ivan was leaving him with his sister... he would escape.

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The light was still on in Ivan's home. It was visible from down the street and at first Matthew hoped that it had only been left on for Ivan's sake. But no, his sister was awake and sitting on the couch, watching mindless TV with a depressingly vacant look. At one in the morning.

There were bags under her eyes, but they lit up when she saw her brother.

"Ivan? You're here," she didn't even pause the YouTube she was streaming, jumping up and coming to an abrupt stop in front of her brother. She looked him up and down as she practically bounced on the spot. "Did you get him?"

"Nyet, I did not," Ivan finally released Matthew's arm and he could feel the blood rush back into the limb.

"O-oh... but you are early," Iryna almost looked like she was pleading with him, or with reality. "Is something wrong? You're staying safe, right?"

Ivan then began to reassure her and explain the circumstances of how he ran into Matthew. It seemed that not only did Iryna know that Ivan was playing vigilante at night (or perhaps something darker), but she was also on board with it.

It was bizarre and Matthew couldn't help but watch it with a degree of fascination. How didn't she resent him? He was going out, while she was left here. Did he twist her arm to make her stay because 'she shouldn't be out' too?

Didn't she want to avenge her sister too? Wasn't her need for vengeance or revenge or justice or whatever pressed on her heart just as overwhelming as her brother's?

Or maybe she just compiled because it was beaten into her. Going up against Ivan wasn't an option and he was her only family left, which surely tormented her that he was being put in such a position where she could only hope and pray that her younger brother returned the next morning.

Maybe family was important after all. Matthew imagined living in an empty house, one without Alfred... *fuck*, he needed to get out of here. Now.

The odds were slim, but the Butcher could've crossed paths with Alfred... The longer Matthew stayed here, the lower the odds were of finding what he had been hunting for so long.

This needed to end tonight.

"You look terrible, you should sleep," Ivan said to his sister, who just shook her head.

"You know I can't..."

"Da, I know you won't but that is okay tonight," Ivan shoved Matthew forward. "You can look after him, he must stay here and not go out."

Of course, Iryna agreed. After some more back and forth between the siblings, Ivan finally left, leaving Matthew stuck with Iryna.

"Um, would you like something to drink?" She flicked her hair about, looking flustered and torn. Matthew knew this was a lot to ask of her, being made to suddenly host and be responsible for someone else. As much as he wanted to make this easier for her, he had to get out of here ASAP. Hopefully, he could do so without her being alarmed.

"No, it's alright, really. I think I'll just go home..."

"You can't go out," she exclaimed, grabbing his wrist. "It's dangerous out there and there's a killer on the loose!"

Didn't he know it? He barely refrained from ripping his wrist free because he had had enough of being manhandled. The weight of someone's hold on his limb was completely foreign and it seared into his skin.

"I'll be fine, really," he insisted.

"But it's illegal and I don't want anyone else to get hurt! Please just stay here for the night."

Matthew sighed. He'd have to try a different approach.

"Okay... I guess it really is scary out there and I'm too tired to make it home..."

Maybe he'd have to sneak back here in the morning so he could tie everything up neatly, but that was something to worry about later. Besides, there was a possibility that everyone would forget about him. Both Ivan and Iryna would have to pass out from fatigue sometime and their priorities might change.

Iryna immediately began fussing over him and leading him to where he was going to sleep. Matthew needed to speed things up but he felt a little guilty for it, especially when he could tell that he liked her. She was nice, but he worried where it came from...

Something echoed inside him when he looked at her, filling him with visceral disgust that he was ever like that. But he couldn't linger on it, not when all he could picture was Alfred in that pool of blood and that little white dog...

Soon enough, he was escorted into a room to sleep in with a brief explanation that there wasn't a spare bedroom because the house was only just big enough for three. Matthew caught the implication that Natalya's room was preserved and that ignited a spark of interest before he was directed to Iryna's own room. She was rambling about it being the only place he could sleep, how she'd feel terrible making him sleep on the couch and therefore it was okay. Still, it did *not* feel okay, even if she was probably going to pass out on the couch.

Matthew didn't have time to linger, and once she left he sprung into action. There was a pile of pillows at the head of her bed which she had instructed to move and he tossed them to the ground before flinging her covers open and shoving the pillows underneath. Hopefully she wouldn't check in on him properly until Ivan came back... and that would be in the morning. He had to hope they would just assume he left then. He worked frantically until he was content and without looking back, quietly shimmied her window open.

His heart was already beating faster than his breath, preparing him.

He ran.

· · — ⋆ · ✶ · ⋆ — · ·

Years of playing and training for hockey spurred him on, but no matter how fast he forced himself to move or how lightheaded he was becoming, it still wasn't enough.

Matthew found where he had been when Ivan took him and slumped against a building as he fought for breath. He needed to be quiet, he needed to *listen*.

But he couldn't, not over his own panting.

He fumbled to put in an earbud and listen to the radio, but all he heard was the same chatter from before. Neutral, unpanicked chatter.

The Butcher *hadn't* struck. *Yet*. He still had time. After sucking in a deep breath of air, he sprinted in the direction he saw Alfred disappear.

· · — ⋆ · ✶ · ⋆ — · ·

It could be too late. The police just might've not discovered the Butcher's bloody scene yet, Matthew might stumble upon it first and desperately hoped that wasn't the case-

The radio crackled as the sounds of metal carved through the airwaves with brutal intention. Matthew ripped the earbud out and kept running.

He had to find the Butcher tonight. He *had* to. It wouldn't be *fair* if Ivan ruined his one chance! His *last* chance!

He kept running and saw no one. No cops, no vigilantes, and no killer. Just him and his own breath visible in the frigid air...

And the distant sound of scraping...

Matthew didn't know how he heard it over the sound of his own laboured breath, but he turned and sprinted towards it.

The Butcher was near and Matthew was going to close in on him because he knew exactly where the killer was. Even though the sound had echoed through the night, Matthew just *knew* where the killer was going to strike.

He ran. It wasn't long until the memorial came into view and he could make out shapes in the fog. Silhouettes of-

The police officer and a dark figure, *the dark figure*- Matthew's mind flashed to the dashcam footage as the same long black coat and gleam of silver appeared- coming up behind the officer and swinging an *axe*-

The Butcher jerked at the last second and the axe carved through flesh and bone alike as it sank right into *Gilbert's shoulder*-

Matthew *knew* he had recognised that officer but that was inconsequential now when blood spurted and Gilbert crumpled with an agonising, curdling scream that rang through the whole city.

Chapter End Notes

DICKNY (ao3) | V3RSA1LL3S (tt) made a vid for this fic! > https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTS5BJq9o/

Originally I was going to do a route like this:
Ivan grabbed Matthew. "Ah, Alfred, you shouldn't..." Eyes narrow, and Matthew knew Ivan knew he wasn't Alfred. "...be here."

But it didn't line up with what I had in mind and where I needed to go, which was what you just read.

Chapter 64: Enjoy :)

Chapter Notes

You have NO idea how long I've been planning for Gilbert to be here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Matthew didn't know why he froze. Maybe because it was too late. Maybe because he *always* had to pick his battles and accept his losses because nothing could go right. Maybe because he knew his strength was in taking his victims by surprise and he had no way to interfere in this scene now or win through brute force. This had been set in motion and he was powerless, only able to watch.

But on the other hand *something* tore through him as he watched *Gilbert* collapse and Matthew had lost *another* one of his victims to this killer. Something that was *his* and meant for *him* and why did it have to be taken before he was ready?!

But he hadn't lost the chance. Not *yet*. if he moved now-

Gilbert was still alive. And instead of ripping the axe free and trying again, the Butcher dropped to the ground.

Something wasn't right. Matthew *saw* the footage of the Butcher in action. He *saw* how skilled he was with that axe, how he moved efficiently and-

The Butcher was ripping his coat off with a haste that didn't make sense. Was the Butcher going to set up a scene similar to Roderich's just to prove once and for all that the Chief had miscalculated for the *last time?* Matthew was torn between his suffocating need to watch and gather information before acting, with the overwhelming pressure screaming to ***do something and do it now.***

But he didn't know what to do and acting without cause would be suicide-

The Butcher desperately shoved his coat against Gilbert's shoulder and held him down when he cried out, the sound piercing the air as the two of them talked in hushed and frantic tones.

This wasn't right. There was no plan, was there? The Butcher clearly didn't want to kill Gilbert and Matthew was moving without thinking. He scrambled through the shadows as he circled to get closer. He *had* to know what they were saying. If he could just hear it, he could think of his options. His heart was beating in his throat and pumping blood into his ears as he kept trying to steal glances at the Butcher and nothing fucking *registered*.

All he knew about the man so far was that he was tall and blond. Now with his head ducked, his face was obscured by a choppy fringe. If Matthew just got close enough to make him out through the glare of the fog...

He could hear him too, apologising over and over. He knew it wasn't Gilbert's voice speaking right now but he *knew* that voice.

"*What did you do?*" Gilbert grunted through gritted teeth as he writhed, half on his side as the axe prevented him from rolling on his back. He turned and reached to claw at the axe that had half dislodged itself due to the way he hit the ground. He gasped and rolled... or rocked, as if he was trying to incite some movement. "*I can't*... feel it... It's not moving!"

"Just-! Stop moving! Stay still or it's going to get worse."

The Butcher's voice was shaky and so *uncanny*. Matthew *knew* him!

Something surged inside him and later Matthew would chalk it up to *knowing* the Butcher didn't want to hurt civilians but right now, there were no thoughts. He just stumbled forward and made his presence known.

Because he *had* to know.

Matthew stood there, breathing heavily and his posture taut like he was ready to move at a moment's notice. His hand was tight around the knife in his pocket and Matthew saw Mathias, who had a terrified and guilty look seared on his face.

*It was **him?!***

Mathias swallowed and slowly raised his hands, eyes flicking down to Gilbert as he did so and back to Matthew just as quickly.

Mathias?!

It didn't make sense how Matthew had missed this!

"I-I didn't mean to..." He licked his lip before biting it, barely able to look at Gilbert. "It was an accident. If I knew, I wouldn't've-"

Gilbert groaned as he fought to push the coat down. His eyes were clouded, his whole body tensed and teeth gritted as he pressed his shaking left hand over his right shoulder. A puddle of his own blood grew beneath him and crawled towards Matthew, almost sparkling in the light. A giant Viking-style axe protruded from his body and caused blood to leak rapidly with every breath.

Mathias shuffled back, movements rigid.

"Just keep p...pressure on it, he'll be okay."

Mathias bolted. Matthew tensed to chase him but couldn't bring himself to run after him. He wanted to. He wanted to so badly. THIS WAS YOUR CHANCE TAKE IT HE'S UNARMED AND IF YOU REVEAL WHO YOU ARE YOU CAN CONVINCE HIM YOU'RE EAGER TO TALK AND TAKE HIM TO THE GRAVEYARD AND SHOW IT ALL TO HIM AND ONCE HIS BACK IS TURNED USE THE LEASH TO PIN HIM AND TAKE YOUR TIME TO TAKE HIM APART BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT YOU NEED THIS IS WHAT YOU WANT TAKE IT OWN IT CLAIM IT.

But Matthew couldn't. His body wouldn't let him. Mathias grew smaller... and the blood before him grew bigger.

MERDE.

He dropped to his knees and shoved the coat around Gilbert's shoulder tighter. The idiot didn't even do it efficiently.

"The Trail Killer... he's..." Gilbert cut off and flailed as Matthew took over. "Get him-!"

The coat was already soaked with blood. Matthew's efforts only wrung the fabric out and drenched his hands. Gilbert was panting and groaning, shifting on the ground like he couldn't get comfortable. Matthew just grunted and pinned him firmly as he pushed down on the coat.

"What are you doing?" Gilbert gritted out. Matthew ignored him, gritting his teeth hard.

This could still work. He wasn't making a big mistake. He knew what the Butcher looked like. He was the *only* one who did and he could get him later. He *knew* Mathias. Mathias wouldn't expect it. He wouldn't expect *him*. 'Matthew' was no threat to him and that's why he ran.

"Get him!" Gilbert groaned again, flailing to point into the fog. Then he grabbed onto something attached to his waist and ripped it off, revealing he had a scabbard and fucking sword-!

Why the hell wasn't it drawn at all? How could Gilbert be so stupid?!

If he didn't stay - Matthew could feel his breathing race to match the bleeding body in front of him because he knew that if he let go, *Gilbert was going to die.*

And if Gilbert died, Matthew would lose his chance to have everything unfold like he wanted it to. He had spent so long envisioning, wanting and *craving* to propel his legacy to a chilling conclusion and now that could be ripped from him *again*.

"Hey!" Gilbert's words cut off into a gasping cry as he seemed to convulse. "Fucking forget about me! Fucking *get him!"*

Gilbert was really starting to piss him off. Matthew grit his teeth so hard he thought they were going to crack as he held back from saying anything. He needed to focus or Gilbert was going to get himself killed.

If Gilbert died, the blood would still be on Matthew's hands. He would be blamed for it-

There were cameras everywhere. Matthew's posture straightened as his head pivoted and his eyes darted everywhere, before glancing back at the shadow of the memorial statue behind them. There were so many names carved into it already... and thanks to *Mathias*, Gilbert wouldn't be one claimed by the Trail Killer. *He* wouldn't be blamed for this, not when there was evidence in his favour, but there was no way he was walking away from this.

And neither was fucking *Mathias*. ***SHIT***. The cameras would catch Mathias' presence here. The Chief was efficient and with every angle covered, there was no way that Mathias would escape with his identity.

Matthew could only hold onto the hope that he got to Mathias before the window of opportunity closed and the police identified him- *Fuck!*

With *Berwald* on the force, it would happen *immediately*.

"You need to get him!" Gilbert was actively trying to shove Matthew off and doing everything he could to *fight* him. "Don't let him get away!"

He needed to deal with Gilbert, *now*. Matthew had to keep batting his trembling hand away. The other one didn't twitch at all and Gilbert kept rambling about how he couldn't get it to move.

"Stop moving! I'm trying to stop the bleeding!" Matthew screamed, looming over Gilbert to gain more leverage. He put his weight into pinning him down and Gilbert screamed in agony.

If Gilbert died, he lost his chance to make it personal. Matthew *needed* Gilbert alive, *needed* him to see the aftermath and continue suffering because if he was *dead*-

Footsteps beat the ground as someone sprinted towards them. Matthew jerked up-

"*Where did he go?*" Kiku demanded, a hand taut around his poised katana firmly behind him.

Matthew needed Kiku's help, Gilbert was going to die- but before he could even demand anything, he checked that Mathias was out of view-

Kiku was gone in an instant, sprinting in the same direction. Something was lodged in Matthew's throat. He wanted to call and make Kiku come back, but nothing could be said that would make him turn around.

No. No no no no no no no non on ono no nno no no onon on o.

MERDE

He had to hang onto the chance that Kiku wouldn't find him. Surely Kiku knew he had a slim chance of succeeding. If he had to ask where Gilbert's attacker went, then he didn't actually see for himself. He didn't *see* that it was *fucking* Mathias.

Only Matthew did. And he couldn't leave Gilbert, who was rapidly getting worse. He had stopped resisting, sagging as his motions became less frantic and didn't even seem to notice or care when Kiku flew by. All he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and groan through the pain. Each ragged breath was accompanied by a strangled noise and a full body twitch.

Matthew was left with the same torn feeling, pulling him in two directions. He grit his teeth as his knees stayed planted against the hard ground and his fingers tangled in Mathias' coat, infected with an overwhelmingly familiar metallic stench. It made his head spin as he inhaled a scent that brought back vivid memories of his own exploits. Never did he think he'd see what it was like to be on the other side.

But he couldn't relish in that, not when his eyes kept darting around with an urgency of *someone* had to come soon. Seriously, where were the cops!? They were crawling everywhere, weren't they? How was it that he didn't see a single one tonight? How couldn't they hear Gilbert when he screamed? Matthew bit the inside of his cheek because he couldn't check the radio *at all*, not when there were so many cameras pointing his way and every moment would be accounted for.

Gilbert's head rolled back onto the pavement with a *crack* and a low moan, his hand slipping from his shoulder and falling by his side. Before Matthew could even ask, or even *assume* the worst, Gilbert pressed his palm against his stomach and groaned as his breathing hitched and throat gurgled.

Matthew could only stare as Gilbert seemed to choke before tilting his head and spitting out discoloured foam.

He couldn't imagine what Gilbert was feeling. At all. He had no frame of reference to even make an assumption beyond the factual and the obvious; it *hurt*. Gilbert was clearly in misery, every muscle in his body twitching and taut as he whimpered and whined.

Matthew couldn't say he had ever experienced something like this. He had never broken a bone, never torn anything, never bled heavier than a scraped knee and the hardest impact he ever had came from falling on ice.

"Gilbert, stay awake." His voice sounded surprisingly comparable to begging and he didn't like it. He didn't like any of this. "Just stay still and stay awake."

"It's spinning..." Gilbert's breathing almost sounded wet, but Matthew might just be too caught up in fearing the worst. "It *hurts*..."

He needed help. *Now*. He couldn't use the police radio but Gilbert still might have something on him. Matthew started patting down the uniform he was wearing as his eyes darted around, not missing the 'L. Beilschmidt' embroidered over the chest.

"Hey..." Gilbert groaned. "You have to get him... he can't get away now! He has to pay..."

"I can't," Matthew replied, urgently feeling every lump on Gilbert's body. "You're dying and I can get him later."

"I know," Gilbert laughed bitterly, then his chest heaved and he choked on a sob as his eyes suddenly swam with tears. "I can't even..." Gilbert grunted in frustration and grief. The sound echoed down the street...

But nobody came.

"Mathias is..." Gilbert blinked and furrowed his eyebrows. "Mathias is... going to get him, right?"

What? Did Gilbert even know what was going on at all? He looked more and more dazed with every passing moment.

Matthew had never drawn out a kill this long. Maybe he should've, but that wasn't something he could think about now.

Matthew glanced at the sword, still snug in the scabbard. If it wasn't for the cameras everywhere, he would've actually entertained the need to pivot. He had Gilbert, *alone*, and even if he didn't set things in motion or choose the scene, he could always turn the albino's blade against him and tell him the truth while holding it to his throat.

But that wasn't an option and it was nothing more than a fleeting thought. Matthew was going to make this work. He could still make things fall in place and that started with making sure this idiot pulled through.

He couldn't believe it when he felt it, though he really should've because Gilbert was so fucking stupid. Gilbert had his phone and why wouldn't he? Matthew yanked it out and jabbed in the emergency number.

"I found the Trail Killer!" Gilbert half slurred, half sobbed as tears rolled down his cheeks and dripped into the crimson puddle staining his hair. "I fucking found him because my awesome plan

totally worked! I knew I could do it. I found him before Opa could because I'm so smart! *Mein Gott*-"

Matthew couldn't even hear the operator over Gilbert's coarse voice and if he didn't have one hand holding the phone, he'd use it to cover the albino's mouth.

"-your emergency?"

He intrinsically knew that everything he did now had to be done with a narrative in mind. It was a feeling that had suffocated him his entire life: the expectation to filter every action and thought before acting on them.

He opened his mouth and fell into his role.

"My friend's been um, he's hurt. At the memorial for all the Trail Killer's victims. The Trail Killer got him and he um," what was the right word for this? Sliced?? "-hit him with an axe and ran off. He's bleeding a lot and the axe is still in him but he's moved and it's been knocked-"

Shit, the operator was going to ask him questions. Maybe he would be alright if he said he didn't see the attacker. The excuse wouldn't hold up when the police saw the footage, saw that he looked the 'Trail Killer' dead in the eye as Gilbert was handed off...

But maybe he could say he blanked and didn't remember anything after he found Gilbert's phone. Panic did strange things to people and he had seen it firsthand. He heard Alfred's account of-

Of *Mathias?!* Fuck.

"I saw him!" Gilbert grunted, interrupting and straining to yell in the phone. "Tell my Opa that I saw him! I saw him first! That means I win and I did it before him!"

Matthew used his other hand to cover his mouth. Shit. He needed to play it off so no one questioned why Gilbert had to be silenced.

"Stay still Gilbert!" He pleaded. "You're delirious! You've lost so much blood!"

Gilbert's head just rolled from side to side, his face paler than Matthew had ever seen it before. Before he knew what he was doing, he slapped him and noticed his own hand was trembling. Gilbert lurched and glared at him weakly.

"He can barely breathe," Matthew relayed into the phone. "He's shaking, he's pale-"

"Keep him still," the operator instructed. "Just keep pressure on the injury and reassure him-"

Matthew put his hand back over the coat and pressed down hard. Slapping Gilbert did work for a moment, but it wasn't exactly effective. He didn't want to lose focus now, he had to keep his head in the game if he wanted to stay ahead-

"Just keep talking to him and stay on the phone, help is on the way."

Matthew knew he was in deep because there was no way he could just walk away after this. Surely the police would want to ask him questions *at best* and burn up valuable time that could be better spent hunting Mathias down.

It would be easy too, he knew where he lived...

But so would the police.

"Can you tell me the patient's name?" The operator continued.

Gilbert snatched the phone from Matthew's hand and brought it to his mouth.

"My name is Gilbert fucking Beilschmidt and I want you to make sure my stupid grandfather knows that I found the Trail Killer before he did. I want everyone to know that I did it first and I found him and it's because I'm awesome! He never thought I was awesome but now this proves it and I don't care about making him happy anymore because he's never been fucking happy with me but he'd better be happy with me even if he's not gonna be happy he's so not gonna be happy that that's okay because that dude is never happy with me and you know what? I've learned to live with it so ja but I need someone to tell him that he sucks so bad and that I'm gonna be waiting for him on the other side cus I know it won't be long until he goes there and I'll be waiting and so will Lud and Rod and Mama und Papa and they're all gonna hear about how unawesome he is."

Then Gilbert hung up and accidentally dropped the phone on his face. He barely even flinched, and his hand dropped over his chest as it heaved. Matthew wanted to be annoyed but that was for the best, he didn't want to stay on the line anyway. But with all the cameras on him and the emergency call being recorded, there was no way to.

And now, it was just him and Gilbert. He didn't want anyone else watching.

"You're going to be alright," Matthew mumbled, pressing both hands on either side of the axe and trying to shove the fabric of the coat *inside* the gaping flesh. He could be reassuring, if only through words as hollow as he was. He was painfully aware that he couldn't fix this. He could only delay it as much as he could until someone came.

If someone came. But with how intense the situation had been, there were police literally everywhere and dropping like flies. It would make sense that there were medical professionals on call for just that reason...

Or not because the ~~Butcher~~ *Mathias* had just been that savage!

But why? Literally what could make Mathias want to do this? Nothing was wrong with him! Or at least, there was nothing wrong with his life!

"It's going to be okay," Gilbert's hand twitched, reaching for Matthew and trying to brush his hair, oblivious that his fingers weren't cooperating. "I'm going to be fine because you're here."

Matthew blinked and he gave Gilbert a look as he pressed his entire forearms down to increase pressure. He couldn't comprehend how or *why* Gilbert was reassured that *he* was here. Gilbert didn't even like him!

"Not long now," Gilbert cackled weakly as his arm flopped down. "I'm kinda surprised... I didn't expect to see you."

Matthew didn't know what to say, so he just kept up the pressure and hoped help would come soon. It *had to*.

"I guess you've been watching me all this time," Gilbert continued rambling, and Matthew's eyes flickered to him.

"Yeah, I have," he said quietly, too curious about where this was going. Hopefully, Gilbert wouldn't remember any of this and make Matthew look suspicious.

If he lived.

"Is it nice?" Gilbert shifted on the ground, and Matthew adjusted to press a knee on his stomach to keep him in place. Gilbert didn't even react.

"Is *what* nice?" It came out a little frustrated because he was more concerned with the axe *not* being knocked out of place, but Gilbert didn't seem to take it that way.

"Don't feel bad for me, I'll see you soon," Gilbert grinned weakly. "We can have a proper uhh," his eyes glazed for a moment before zoning back in on Matthew's face. "Runiting."

He didn't see Matthew, did he? After having gone his whole life repeating moments just like this one, he instinctively knew it. When he was 'Matthew', he'd painstakingly correct everyone and blame himself for the awkward fallout. Then when he picked up the knife, he realised there was a benefit to being mistaken for someone else.

Maybe in this moment, he could be whoever Gilbert wanted him to be.

"I'm here now," Matthew leaned in both metaphorically and literally, basically crushing Gilbert as he pressed as much as he could into Mathias' coat. "So just let me save you, eh?"

"Riiight," Gilbert struggled to breathe as Matthew pressed down on him, but he didn't seem too distressed. If anything, he just seemed calmer, especially when he forced his hand up and pushed it against Matthew's face. "It's because you want me to stay for Toni, right?"

Matthew just nodded. Whatever floated Gilbert's boat. He glanced around the streets but couldn't hear or see anything. He knew he had only called a minute ago but *surely* there was people on standby during the curfew! Even if it was just the police! Wouldn't they be alerted too? Where the hell were they?

Also it was so lucky that Gilbert didn't even seem to know what was going on because *if he had said something on the phone*... all it would've taken was *one* name drop...

"I know I need to...I should say sorry about the memorial... I got *druuuunk*," Gilbert huffed in resignation, his breath forming a puff in the cold air. It was the only movement on the street as Gilbert began tearing. "I need to look after him... It's what you'd want me to do, right? And it's not just Toni?"

As Matthew nodded, Gilbert turned his head away.

"LUD! BRUDER? WO BIST DU? You want me to look after Feli, right? Oh mein Gott... *Feli... Feli..."* Gilbert wasn't looking at Matthew as he choked. His eyes lingered, skimming the empty space in the fog. No one was there. "I'm sorry... I really suck, don't I? But you're still proud, right?"

Matthew didn't like what he was seeing and grabbed Gilbert's face to make him look at him. Gilbert sniffled, still straining to look around at the emptiness around them. "You know I'm proud of you,

right? I know that probably doesn't mean much coming from me because *kesese* I look pretty shitty now-"

"Gilbert!" Matthew growled. While he knew it was the most likely possibility, he didn't like how Gilbert was acting.

But Gilbert ignored him, straining to look at that blank space while calling his brother's name. Then when his head rolled and he stared blankly at the heavens above, he started calling for 'Opa' while his breath heaved with wet gasps.

"Fuck.... Opa... fuck... *Opa*..." Gilbert cut off with a gasp and tears swelled over his eyes and overflowed over the corner of his eyes. "He's going to be all alone... ich brauche... hahhhhh, jemand... tell him I'm sorry," each word was spaced by a surge in breath and the struggle for the text. "Tut mir wirklich leid... eigentlich... ich liebe... ich wollte sehr gern... dss... hnnn"

Matthew couldn't help his panic. His heart was thumping in his throat because this was way too real. Gilbert was going to die and he couldn't stop it. He panted as he strained to keep the pressure on and glanced down the street and his stomach flipped in relief when he saw flashing lights lighting up the fog above the streets. He wanted to feel relieved but it ached to know that it might already be too late. That despite their best efforts, Gilbert would be gone.

And Matthew wasn't ready for that at all.

"Just stop moving, help's coming," Matthew demanded, catching Gilbert's attention. "Gilbert, just-"

"You're not going to leave me, are you?" Gilbert was jerking with the force of his sobs, but Matthew didn't let up. "I missed you... I really missed you... why'd you have to go?"

Then Gilbert was flinging his arm around Matthew and pulling him close. It was only because Matthew was caught off guard that his strength was effective and he collapsed into Gilbert's chest.

"I'm so cold..." Gilbert whined with his strained voice. "Is this what you felt...?"

Matthew couldn't answer when he was more focused on finding a position that could keep the coat from slipping. He knew that he could just push himself up, break the hold and resume the pose he had before, half hunched over Gilbert and desperately pushing down on him... but not only did his back really hurt from that but he just couldn't bring himself to pull away. Not when the albino was fisting the back of his shirt and pressing him close with all his might.

"I really wish I knew why it happened... I don't know why it happened," Gilbert continued to rasp. "I want to... to talk to Opa... again. Can you wait?"

There was something... compelling... that irked his brain but it really was the last of his concerns because at least like this, he could make sure Gilbert was still breathing by the time those approaching lights made it over here.

To give them credit, they were approaching fast. But not fast *enough*. With Gilbert clinging to him, Matthew could feel his strength wavering and he was fading... even when Gilbert shoved his face right into his messy hair, tickling the tufts with his erratic breathing, Matthew was going crazy as he tried to measure the depth of each one and hope it wasn't the last. Matthew's hands were tingling as Gilbert murmured something about always being brothers and his fingers slipped...

The ambulance was flanked by police cars and it made Matthew's stomach lurch. He didn't want to face what came next. He wanted to stay with Gilbert and let the other cling to him until the last second when the paramedics pried them apart.

After that, he didn't know what to expect and he didn't want to face it unprepared.

WHAT HAS HE DONE...

Chapter End Notes

Bro really thinks he's Haaland fr fr.

Also atp idk if Denmark's name is Mathias/Matthias/Mattress but while I personally prefer Matthias I spelt it with one T the whole fic so I could ctrl + f easily and now it's like second nature but they're also interchangeable. What have I done.

In the next few days I'll leave a comment on this chapter detailing all the foreshadowing I intentionally did so you guys can have a nosey and think I'm super smart for it!

quiza_soy_iris (tt) drew something for chapter 63! > https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNRoNSDpm/ https://vm.tiktok.com/ZN81Y9A4F/

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!